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Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch*

Edited by
Stephen Prince

CAMBRIDGE FILM HANDBOOKS



Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch*

Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* is one of the most influential films in American cinema. The intensity of its violence was unprecedented, while the director's use of multiple cameras, montage editing, and slow motion quickly became the normative style for rendering screen violence. Demonstrating to filmmakers the power of irony as a narrative voice and its effectiveness as a tool for exploring and portraying brutality, *The Wild Bunch* fundamentally changed the Western, moving it into a more brutal and psychopathic territory than it had ever inhabited before. This volume includes freshly commissioned essays by several leading scholars of Peckinpah's work. Examining the film's production history from script to screen, its rich and ambivalent vision of American society, and its relationship to the western genre, among other topics, it provides a definitive reinterpretation of an enduring film classic.

Stephen Prince is Associate Professor of Communication Studies at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. He is the author of *Savage Cinema: Sam Peckinpah and the Rise of Ultra-Violent Movies*; *Movies and Meaning: An Introduction to Film*; and *Visions of Empire: Political Imagery in Contemporary American Film*.

CAMBRIDGE FILM HANDBOOKS SERIES

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For My Parents
and Tami
and Kim

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Contributors

Michael Bliss, a teacher of English and film at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, is the author of *Justified Lives: Morality and Narrative in the Films of Sam Peckinpah*, coauthor (with Christina Banks) of *What Goes Around Comes Around: The Films of Jonathan Demme*, and editor of *Doing It Right: The Best Criticism of Sam Peckinpah's "The Wild Bunch."* Having just completed *Dreams Within a Dream: The Films of Peter Weir*, Bliss is now cowriting *A Sense of Loss: John Woo, Hong Kong Cinema, and 1997*.

David A. Cook directs the Film Studies Program at Emory University. He is the author of *A History of Narrative Film*, a major text in its field that is now in its third edition.

Wheeler Winston Dixon is Chair of the Film Studies Program and Professor of English at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln. His books include *The Films of Jean-Luc Godard*, *It Looks at You: The Returned Gaze of Cinema*, and *The Early Film Criticism of François Truffaut*.

Devin McKinney is a freelance writer living in New York City. He is a frequent contributor to *Film Quarterly* and is currently writing a novel.

Stephen Prince is Associate Professor of Communication Studies at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. He is the author of *Savage Cinema: Sam Peckinpah and the Rise of Ultra-Violent Movies*, *Movies and Meaning: An Introduction to Film*, and *Visions of Empire: Political Imagery in Contemporary American Film*.

Paul Seydor is a film editor who lives in Los Angeles. His recent work includes *Tin Cup*, *Cobb*, *White Men Can't Jump*, and *Turner and Hooch*. He is the author of *Peckinpah: The Western Films: Reconsideration*.

Christopher Sharrett is Associate Professor of Communication at Seton Hall University. He is the editor of *Crisis Cinema: The Apocalyptic Idea in Postmodern Narrative Film*. His work has appeared in *Cineaste*, *Film Quarterly*, *Persistence of Vision*, *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, *Millennium*, *CineAction*, and elsewhere. His essays have been anthologized in *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, *Perspectives on German Cinema*, *The New American Cinema*, and other books. His book *Mythologies of Violence in Post-modern Media* is forthcoming from Wayne State University Press.

Introduction: Sam Peckinpah, Savage Poet of American Cinema

Running out of space and time in a modernizing West, a band of outlaws led by Pike Bishop (William Holden) rides into the Texas border town of San Rafael to stick up the railroad office. The railroad, however, has hired a passel of bounty hunters to annihilate the Bunch. Led by Pike's old friend Deke Thornton, the vulturelike bounty hunters ambush the Bunch from the rooftops of the town, killing outlaws and townspeople with indiscriminate glee. Pike escapes, along with Dutch (Ernest Borgnine), Lyle and Tector Gorch (Warren Oates, Ben Johnson), and Angel (Jamie Sanchez). They are joined outside town by old Freddie Sykes (Edmond O'Brien), whereupon they discover that the bags of cash they took from the depot are dummies stuffed with worthless washer rings. Broke, they cross into Mexico, pursued by Thornton and his gang. The Bunch go to work for General Mapache (Emilio Fernandez), a cruel despot fighting on behalf of a corrupt government and against a popular revolution. After the Bunch steals guns for the general, Mapache seizes and tortures Angel. To avenge Angel, the Bunch confronts and kills Mapache, precipitating a sustained slaughter during which the members of the Bunch wipe out most of Mapache's army and are themselves killed. The survivors,

Freddie Sykes and Deke Thornton, join forces with the peasant revolutionaries.

Sam Peckinpah modestly said that with *The Wild Bunch* he wasn't trying to make an epic but only to tell a simple story about bad men in changing times. But *The Wild Bunch* is an epic work, and it has had an epic impact on the American cinema. The scale and scope of its bloodletting were unprecedented, and Peckinpah's use of multiple cameras, montage editing, and slow motion quickly became the normative style for rendering screen violence. The film helped move the Western into a mud-spattered, more brutal, and psychopathic territory, and it showed subsequent filmmakers the power of irony as a narrative voice and its effectiveness as a tool for exploring, and portraying, a brutal screen world. Director Martin Scorsese called the film "savage poetry."¹

Part of this savagery lies in Peckinpah's unflinching depiction of the characters. The outlaws led by Pike Bishop are stone killers, and the film presents them without apology. Pike coldly executes a wounded comrade after the botched holdup in San Rafael that opens the film, and astride his horse, he remorselessly tramples a woman during the confusion ensuing from the rooftop ambush. In the prelude to this ambush, as the Bunch ride into town, a group of smiling, laughing children look up from their play. But these are not the typical children, icons of sentimentality and innocence, that were so prominent in earlier generations of film. These children are patiently, joyously torturing a scorpion to death. By intercutting this torture with the following action, the shootout in town, Peckinpah encapsulated in striking imagery a vision of brutality and violence unfolding within an implacably cruel world, and he ensured that the depicted violence assumed a metaphysical dimension, as a force observable throughout human life, evident in the behavior of children as in that of adults.

Peckinpah, though, went beyond the immediate savagery of the material to search out the humanity that coexists in the Bunch with their remorseless use of violence. Typically, and in keeping with his other work as a filmmaker, Peckinpah located this redemptive humanity in the experience of psychological an-



FIGURE I

Peckinpah confers with actor William Holden, who plays Pike Bishop. Pike's anguish provides the psychological foundation of the film.

guish and torture. *The Wild Bunch* is Pike Bishop's film, and it is Bishop's anguished awareness of his terrible failings that gives the film its psychological depth and the violence its emotional resonance. The Gorch brothers are not well individuated as characters, and Dutch, though a forceful character, lacks the inner darkness of self-betrayal and the lacerated consciousness that Peckinpah would locate here, and in his other films, as indexes of the spiritual suffering that transforms and ennobles his fallen heroes. Through this psychological suffering, the inner humanity of these characters, otherwise debased through violence, asserts itself. Pike's call to his gang to confront Mapache and reclaim Angel follows from his horrified, haunted glimpse of his inner corruption, and this defiant assertion of loyalty to a comrade is Pike's means of refuting and overcoming everything that he has become and that he

hates. But this transcendent assertion of humanity precipitates and accompanies a scene of apocalyptic violence as the outlaws massacre Mapache's men and are themselves annihilated. Peckinpah audaciously mixes ferocious, orgiastic violence with humanistic assertions about the importance of honor and loyalty and about the internal, psychological suffering that is the spiritual accompaniment, and consequence, of physical violence. Through this volatile mix, he achieves what Scorsese perceptively recognized as savage poetry, going inside the hurricane of violence to reveal its internal features and the residual, if deformed, humanity that exists, frighteningly, inside acts of brutality.

Peckinpah showed this brutality more candidly than any American filmmaker had before, but he went beyond its mechanical stylization to explore its effects upon heart and mind. He aimed to prod audiences into an ambivalent response, excited by the aesthetic stylization of slow-motion violence while being appalled by its physical effects and emotional and moral consequences. Peckinpah's explicit screen violence was not exploitive, nor was it a cold calculation for box-office effect. Peckinpah was a serious artist and moralist, and his use of violence in *The Wild Bunch* was sober and didactic. It was also so spectacular that he would forever after be identified with the turn in modern cinema toward graphic bloodshed. We will turn to these issues and explore the significance of the film's violence in a moment. First, it will be helpful to place *The Wild Bunch* within Peckinpah's career and to consider his decisive impact upon the Western genre.

PECKINPAH'S EARLY CAREER

Peckinpah started work in the film industry in the 1950s as a dialogue director working with Don Siegel, a filmmaker under contract with Allied Artists. Siegel had apprenticed as an editor in the montage unit at Warner Bros., and his pictures as a director (which would include the cult hit *Dirty Harry* [1972]) were distinguished by their crisp and efficient editing. Thus, it is fitting that Peckinpah trained under Siegel because Peckinpah's mature

work as a director features a remarkable style of editing. As a dialogue director, Peckinpah worked on five Siegel pictures: *Riot in Cell Block 11* (1954), *Private Hell 36* (1954), *Annapolis Story* (1955), *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), and *Crime in the Streets* (1956). Peckinpah also appeared in *Body Snatchers* in a cameo role. In later years, he affectionately recalled Siegel's formative influence:

I must say he was kind enough not to laugh openly while watching me run about with both of my feet in my mouth and my thumb up my ass. (This is not easy.) . . . He was my "patron" and he made me work and made me mad and made me think. Finally, he asked me what his next set-up was and for once I was ready, and he used it. I guess that was the beginning.²

Following the training with Siegel, Peckinpah worked for the next several years primarily in television, where he quickly established the Western as his special metier. From 1955 to 1960, Peckinpah wrote scripts for *Gunsmoke* and other popular television series including *Tales of Wells Fargo*, *Broken Arrow*, *Zane Grey Theater*, and *The Rifleman*. Peckinpah helped create this last series, and wrote and directed several episodes, but he left the show because of a difference of interpretation over the material. Peckinpah wanted the show to have an adult and serious focus in showing the passage of young Lucas McCain (Johnny Crawford) into manhood. The other producers, however, envisioned the series as a kids' show and preferred that Lucas remain a child and not be depicted as growing up. Following this spat, which prefigured the later stormy relationships with film producers that would eventually help derail Peckinpah's career, Sam got the chance to direct and produce his own series, *The Westerner*, about a wandering drifter, Dave Blassingame (Brian Keith). Though the series was canceled in 1960 by the network before completing its first season, Peckinpah had brought to television a markedly more adult tone, a harder-edged violence, and an unsentimental depiction of Western riffraff and lowlifes that clearly foreshadowed the direction in which he would take the genre in his feature films. In a letter to Chuck Connors, who starred in *The Rifleman*, Peckinpah

described Blassingame as "a drifter and a bum; illiterate, usually inarticulate. He is as realistic a cowboy as I could create."³

Peckinpah continued to write Western film scripts, some of which were eventually made by other filmmakers (*One-Eyed Jacks*, 1961; *The Glory Guys*, 1965; *Villa Rides*, 1968), and when the opportunity to do features arose, he quickly achieved a mature artistic success with the magisterial and now-classic *Ride the High Country* (1962), his second feature. Peckinpah infused this simple story of two aging gunfighters (Randolph Scott and Joel McCrea) in the twilight of their career with remarkable feeling and the sneaky affection for slopbucket, redneck, peckerwood trash (in the randy Hammond clan, the film's villains) that would surface again so memorably in *The Wild Bunch's* bounty hunters. *Ride the High Country* was tossed away by its studio, MGM, as a drive-in movie, but its evident artistry suggested that Peckinpah might indeed be the most important director of Westerns since John Ford (*Stagecoach* [1939], *The Searchers* [1956], *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* [1962]).

Certification of that potential had to await *The Wild Bunch*, however, because Peckinpah's next film, *Major Dundee* (1964), was a troubled production – over budget, over schedule, cut by the studio against the director's wishes – and it earned Peckinpah the reputation of a troublemaker. The studio cut up to twenty-seven minutes from the film, rendering its story about a unit of Union and Confederate soldiers pursuing a band of Apaches into Mexico nearly incomprehensible. The resulting mess that the studio released badly damaged Peckinpah's reputation, but the director fought back. He wrote to the film's producer, Jerry Bresler, "The 18 minutes that you have cut, disregarding my strongest objections, have in my opinion effectively destroyed my concept of story, character development, mood and meaning. . . . You are a well-poisoner, Jerry, and I damn you for it."⁴

To a reviewer who complained that the film was bewildering and confusing, Peckinpah wrote, "You are absolutely correct. After seeing it at the Press Screening, February 4th, 1965, I didn't know what in hell it was about and I was the director. . . . The film I made is on the cutting room floor."⁵ While this experience was

undeniably a bitter one for Peckinpah, and while *Major Dundee* was not the great film Peckinpah would claim it to be, he retained the ability to joke about it. He maintained a warm correspondence with star Charlton Heston (who played Major Dundee), and while in Mexico working on *The Wild Bunch*, Peckinpah wrote to Heston, who had just scored a big success with *Planet of the Apes* (1968).

I am sitting here with Gordon Dawson, in Torreon, in the middle of a dust-rain-hail storm, thinking of new projects and we have decided to make a new picture. It will be called "Major Dundee Goes Ape" – grabs you, doesn't it? Sex, sentiment, and security – security, that is, if we can get Jerry Bresler to come back.

Peckinpah closed by saying, modestly, that *The Wild Bunch* "might turn out to be a reasonably good film."⁶

PRODUCTION OF *THE WILD BUNCH*

He was absolutely correct, and the picture was so great, defiant, and trend-setting that it relaunched Peckinpah's career after the *Dundee* disaster and his firing that same year as director of *The Cincinnati Kid*, a Steve McQueen picture. In 1967, Peckinpah had submitted a script called *The Wild Bunch* to Kenneth Hyman, a young vice-president at Warner Bros.–Seven Arts, who was committed to the policy and philosophy of a film director exercising artistic control over a film's design and production. The script, rewritten by Peckinpah, originally had been penned by Walon Green from a story by Roy Sickner. The narrative itself is fairly simple, but Peckinpah transformed it into an epic portrait of loyalty and honor and filmed it with ferocity and passion. The picture was cast in early 1968, and, with the decision to film entirely on location in Mexico, principal photography began on March 25, 1968. Seventy days were allotted for filming the 541 scenes in the script. As a measure of the intensity and responsibility with which Peckinpah worked (he told Ken Hyman, "Of all the projects I have ever worked on, this is closest to me."⁷),



FIGURE 2

Peckinpah (far right) watches as his crew films the Bunch as the outlaws ride into San Rafael before the ambush.

principal photography was concluded on June 27, 1968, only nine and one-half days behind schedule.

The first two weeks of shooting were devoted to one of the film's most complicated sequences, the payroll robbery in San Rafael and the consequent shoot-out, filmed on location in Pararas, Coahuila, Mexico. On day one, the company was called at 6:30 A.M., had gotten their first shot by 9:30 A.M., and wrapped at 6:30 P.M.⁸ Shooting the San Rafael material required the presence of up to 244 extras and 80 animals. Despite the complexity of this material, Peckinpah successfully captured his footage within the allotted two-week time frame.

The Aqua Verde material, the film's other most structurally complex sequence, was filmed over a period of thirty-two days, from the twenty-seventh day of shooting through the fifty-sixth day. Despite the intensity of the physical action depicted on screen during the gun battle between the Bunch and Mapache, physical accidents were relatively infrequent. On day fifty-one, a misfiring squib burned actor William Holden's arm, and two days after that,



FIGURE 3

Peckinpah plans the filming of the Aqua Verde sequences.

actor Ben Johnson (as Tector Gorch) broke his middle finger while firing the machine gun. The Aqua Verde filming required that Peckinpah coordinate over 300 extras and more than 500 animals. This scale of production makes his achievement of a 79-day shoot all the more impressive, especially given the necessity of solving each day's routine but aggravating problems. Peckinpah outlined some of these in his memos to producer Phil Feldman. They included badly functioning special effects, hazards posed by weather and locale, and the logistical difficulties of moving a large production company from place to place:

During the first weeks of the show props, namely guns, were inoperative. Special effects were worse than inoperative, a situation which still exists. Sets are not ready and dressed when needed.⁹

Whether to save money, water or just lack of planning, the water trucks have been watering less than one half of the road and

stopping after one trip. At least half of us are eating dust all the way.¹⁰

Grenade explosion timed correctly, however had not been pre-tested and dust obscured two-thirds of the action. . . . Impossible to make next shot before lunch as shoulder squib placed in Lyle's shirt did not match master shot . . . all squibs in Lyle's shirt have to be replaced because they are visible to the camera.¹¹

Wind storm and rain; 1 hour, lost the light but finished sequence with brutes. Moved to the bridge; people, horses and props, 30 minutes to two hours late. Returned, rehearsed, broke for lunch, overcast could not shoot.¹²

Working with a sustained level of commitment and passion that he never again achieved in his career, Peckinpah surmounted these and other problems. With the completion of shooting, Peckinpah and editor Lou Lombardo had the difficult task of turning miles of raw footage into a disciplined, organized narrative. To appreciate what Peckinpah and his crew accomplished, it is instructive to consider how some of the film's scenes and story structure were shaped during the critical phase of postproduction. (Postproduction is the work of filmmaking that follows cinematography, including, chiefly, picture and sound editing.) The shaping in postproduction of narrative and theme is a routine occurrence on every film. Filmmakers never get things exactly right at the point of shooting, and very often, considerable reshaping of the material occurs on a postproduction basis. Perhaps the film's most memorable imagery is the opening scene's tableau of the children with the scorpion and ants. Initial plans also called for the incorporation of a train in the opening since the Bunch rides into San Rafael through the railroad yards. This did not work out, however, as Peckinpah explained to Feldman. "We have decided that the value of the train in the opening sequence is negligible because there is no way to get any speed in that area. We are therefore concentrating on scorpions and ants."¹³

The design and cutting of this sequence were the subjects of

several memos from producer Phil Feldman to Peckinpah. Feldman was concerned that an initial cut spent too much time – two and one-half minutes – on the ants and scorpions, seemingly used every take of the children's faces, and, by starting on the scorpion and ants rather than the children, might prove confusing for the audience. (Feldman also wished to discuss with Peckinpah the symbolism of this imagery to determine whether it should be used elsewhere in the film – specifically, before the Aqua Verde shootout.)¹⁴

In general, in this initial cut, the picture was getting off to a slow start, with nearly seventeen minutes elapsing before the shootout in San Rafael. Feldman specifically urged Peckinpah to connect and integrate the ants with the children by using a shot that panned along a stick that one child was holding in the nest of ants. The pan would connect the children and their prey in an explicit fashion that would be necessary, Feldman believed, if the picture opened, as Peckinpah wanted, on a contextless close-up of the ants. In its revised design, after the children are established, Peckinpah goes to the first close-up of the insects when the boy shoves his stick forward, establishing a matching element for the close-up in which the stick is prominent. In response to Feldman's recommendations, the sequence was reshaped so that the scorpion-ant imagery is integrated more efficiently with the surrounding material and the children are established first, before the close-ups of the insects and scorpion. The result was a memorably poetic and symbolic sequence commenting on the human appetite for cruelty and savagery that Peckinpah believed underlay so much of recorded history.

The narrative of the film is cast as an extended pursuit, with the Bunch chased by the bounty hunters until each group is destroyed. The story alternates between scenes depicting each group with the emotional dynamics and conflicts among their members, and one of the creative challenges in editing the picture involved finding the right balance between the scenes depicting the outlaws and those depicting the bounty hunters. During post-production, Peckinpah explained to Feldman that the bounty hunters ought to be treated as a subsidiary element of the narrative. "I feel very

strongly that our story is tied in primarily with the Wild Bunch and that the Bounty Hunters should be used as counterpoint.”¹⁵ Treating them as a counterpoint element influenced the cutting of the film’s concluding Aqua Verde battle. In an initial cut of the picture, the bounty hunters had seemingly vanished from the screen for a protracted period of time, leading to some awkwardness upon their reintroduction and some concern from Feldman that the viewer might lose touch with these characters. Peckinpah, accordingly, inserted footage of the bounty hunters, hovering nearby, during the Aqua Verde battle. He reassured Feldman, “We will intercut the last fight to keep the Bounty Hunters alive.”¹⁶ Treating the bounty hunters as a counterpoint element also helped influence the decision about how to handle their deaths. Footage had been shot showing them killed by the Mexican revolutionaries, but at Feldman’s suggestion, Peckinpah wisely decided to let their deaths occur as an off-screen event. Peckinpah thanked Feldman for this idea. “Your idea of taking out the killing of the bounty hunters was *absolutely correct*.”¹⁷

Postproduction work on the film helped eliminate an excruciatingly terrible line of dialogue. During the final fight, Peckinpah had filmed Dutch looking at Pike and saying, “We’re doing it right this time,” a remark that plays off of an earlier comment by Pike, made just before the train robbery. Feldman pointed out to Peckinpah that viewers would find the line silly, and he recommended that the idea be communicated nonverbally between Dutch and Pike. Feldman wrote to Peckinpah, “I agree that it could be considered camp and laughable. It is the one line in the picture that I think should be deleted because of audience reaction. . . . I know you think it’s necessary, but I think it should be cut and we should do it all with just looks between Borgnine and Holden.”¹⁸ Here, and elsewhere, Feldman offered exceptionally keen advice to Peckinpah on the artistic shaping of the film, demonstrating how important it can be for a good director to have a supportive and intelligent producer.

Postproduction fine-tuning on the film helped sharpen its focus and make the presentation of its themes more sophisticated. Peck-



FIGURE 4

Peckinpah filmed the death of the bounty hunters, but producer Phil Feldman persuaded him to treat it as an off-screen event.

Peckinpah had shot a ton of footage, and the requisite trimming of this material, unfortunately, made some of the subsidiary characters less defined and coherent. For example, the woman who shoots Pike in the back does so because of her close relationship with Mapache, a relationship Peckinpah tried to convey at various points in the film. The fine-tuning of the picture, however, minimized this connection. Peckinpah warned Feldman that the editing of the scene where Mapache's forces are attacked by Villa was in danger of muddying the relationship between Mapache and Yolonda.

(Ultimately, this entire scene was cut from the film by the studio, but it has since then been restored.) Peckinpah wrote to Feldman,

I have now seen the La Goma battle with Mapache's reaction cut out as per your request, two times. I think it is obvious to us both, as previously cut, that Yolonda looks at the General and his reaction to her was overdone but not having *any* reaction is now even worse. I find it is possible . . . to cut short her looking at him and to add a brief reaction to her which, as I'm sure you'll know, will tie the two together. I have tried to do this throughout the picture, as the position she has is inevitably close to the General. She is "his woman." . . . It is because of this that she shoots Holden in the back.¹⁹

As the film is now cut, Yolonda's shooting of Pike in the back seems somewhat gratuitous and minimally motivated. But this is



FIGURE 5

Pike, moments before he is shot in the back by Yolonda. Her character was a casualty of postproduction.

a function of the reduction (probably necessary to preserve narrative economy and efficiency) of her character to what is now essentially an extra, someone who appears as part of a group but lacks a defined identity. Yolonda's fate, victim of postproduction, exemplifies the trade-offs that are a routine part of film production, especially when the film in question is as complex as this one.

Much of the postproduction work on the film involved Peckinpah and Feldman's efforts to meet the objections to content of the Motion Picture Association of America's (MPAA) Code and Rating Administration. The MPAA was (and is) the film industry's administrative agency charged with helping to regulate movie content. Accordingly, it is very sensitive to depictions of profanity, sexuality, and violence. During production of *The Wild Bunch*, the MPAA retired its old (but recently revised) Production Code, which had shaped movie content for decades, and instituted a new G-M-R-X ratings system administered by the Code and Rating Administration (CARA). The MPAA's initial reaction to and evaluation of the script reflected the realities of the revised Production Code during the pre-CARA period when production of the film commenced. Given the existing parameters governing movie content, the MPAA deemed the proposed film, as scripted, to be largely unacceptable. "In its present form this story is so violent and bloody and filled with so many crudities of language that we would hesitate to say that a picture based on this material could be approved under the Production Code."²⁰ The MPAA added, however, that if the material was toned down, an SMA (Suggested for Mature Audiences) label might be possible.

MPAA concerns centered on the script's abundant profanity and on several sequences where the bloodletting was considered excessive or unacceptably graphic. These included the action during the opening shoot-out in which a farm boy on a wagon fires a shotgun into Buck's face, blinding him, after which Lyle Gorch shoots and kills the boy. According to the MPAA, this action "will have to be handled with great care not to be visually sickening."²¹ Other objectionable material cited by the MPAA included Pike's killing of Buck in the arroyo (deemed "excessively brutal"²²), Mapache

cutting Angel's throat (deemed "unacceptable"²³), and the extensive crowd killings during the Aqua Verde massacre (deemed "a blood bath").²⁴ Despite the MPAA's concerns, production on the picture commenced under the revised Production Code. However, by the time the picture was being edited, the Code was gone and the new ratings system was in place. This new system gave filmmakers in the late 1960s greatly expanded creative freedom because the ratings designated certain films, for the first time, as being unsuitable for children. Without the relaxation of censorship policies that the new CARA system represented, Peckinpah could not have released *The Wild Bunch* with its explicit images of bloodshed.

In the negotiations with the MPAA that followed principal photography, none of the episodes to which the MPAA had originally objected, or others (Angel being dragged by the automobile, Lyle at the machine gun, and Crazy Lee riddled with bullets), were deleted from the film, but they were rendered less graphic through careful editing. The SMA category was now history, and the CARA system gave Peckinpah and his producer enhanced freedom and flexibility in retaining and shaping their graphic screen violence. Of key importance for this film's remarkable production history, Peckinpah and his editors could cut the film to achieve an R rating rather than to satisfy a (revised) Production Code.

With respect to the boy in the wagon who is shot by Lyle, the MPAA objected to the bullet hit and the blood, so editor Lou Lombardo omitted these and caught the boy in mid-fall, well after he has been struck by Lyle's shot. (Producer Phil Feldman outlined the necessity for this manner of editing the footage in a letter to Warners executive Ken Hyman, which discussed specific editing solutions to the MPAA's objections.)²⁵ The editing feels a little jagged here, and the action may even seem a bit confusing. Critics have sometimes contrasted the optical confusions in the film's opening massacre with the clarity of perspective in the Aqua Verde shootout and have interpreted this as a stylistic statement about the unity of purpose with which the Bunch is fighting at the end. By contrast, at the beginning of the film, they are a more fractious

group. The most confusing imagery in the opening shoot-out is the action in which the boy in the wagon shoots Buck, but this raggedness arose for very pragmatic reasons rather than for ones of thematic symbolism. The raggedness of the cutting was a function of having to pare back this very fast-moving material to satisfy the MPAA.

With respect to Buck's killing in the arroyo, this scene was edited to play mainly on his back, with very few quick, flash glimpses of his bloody face. Angel's drag by the automobile was shortened, with fewer close-ups of his ragged body. The editing of Mapache slitting Angel's throat deleted a side view of this action and the gush of blood that followed. This alteration enabled producer Feldman to reassure the MPAA that "all that happens is that Mapache completes his stroke over Angel's throat. There is no spurt of blood, but merely a show."²⁶ This is the one revision that has clearly dated the film's violence. By today's standards, the throat cutting seems somewhat anticlimactic because it is so abbreviated and without evident bloodshed. But the film could not have been released (as an R-rated picture) without this change.

In discussing with his director the need to alter the film to minimize its bloodshed, producer Phil Feldman was keenly supportive of Peckinpah's desire to push the limits of what was acceptable, and he interpreted the MPAA's objections as proof that their intentions for the film would be successful. Prior to the onset of principal photography, Feldman sent Peckinpah a copy of the MPAA's script report and included this assessment: "I am sending you a copy of the MPAA report from Shurlock. I think you can disregard this on the whole. As a matter of fact, I am rather pleased, as I am sure you are, that he finds it objectionable."²⁷ At the same time, Feldman urged Peckinpah to assess carefully the extent of the picture's bloodshed in relation to other prominent and trend-setting films of the period. This would help Peckinpah gauge tolerance levels for violence in potential viewers of the film. Feldman specifically urged Peckinpah to look at Sergio Leone's films (*A Fistful of Dollars*, *For a Few Dollars More*). "I think it might be good for you to have a comparative basis before you finally decide just how



FIGURE 6

Villa's attack on Mapache's army was among the sequences deleted following the film's premiere.

far other people have gone in the field of blood and gore and what the public is comparing us to."²⁸ The importance of Feldman's support for Peckinpah's audacity in designing the film's extreme violence has been overshadowed by subsequent events, chiefly the film's Feldman-sanctioned recutting for distribution (and not for censorship). Feldman, however, was a fine producer, and, as his memos to Peckinpah demonstrate, he was exceptionally dedicated to helping to make this an outstanding production and was closely involved with Peckinpah in shaping the film's artistic design.

The most unfortunate editing of the picture was prompted not by artistic or narrative considerations but solely by commercial calculation. Shortly after its national premiere, the picture was recalled by the studio, and several key sequences were deleted: the

"Being sure is my business" flashback Pike and Deke share showing Deke's capture by police in the bordello; dialogue between Pike and Freddie Sykes about Freddie's grandson Crazy Lee, coupled with a flashback showing Pike's abandonment of Crazy Lee during the San Rafael holdup; incidental business in Angel's village when the Bunch visit; and the attack of Villa's forces upon Mapache. Much of this footage, particularly the crucial flashback material, deepens the characters, particularly Pike, and adds complexity to their behavior. Peckinpah felt betrayed by Feldman, who made the cuts without telling him, and this helped darken and sour his outlook on producers. From this point on, he generally had his hackles up when dealing with studios. To the end of his life, Peckinpah was haunted by the loss of this film in an edited assembly of which he approved. In 1980, he wrote to Lucien Ballard, the film's cinematographer:

Lucien, it has just come to my attention that there are rumors that the first married print of *The Wild Bunch* still exists. If so, and someone is lucky enough to get their hands on it, would you know of a lab to do a good CRI and re-time it so that certain people might have a chance to see what it was really about. (Undercover, of course).²⁹

Though Peckinpah did not live to see his greatest film restored to its theatrical glory, it was so restored in 1995. New 35mm and 70mm prints were struck, including the deleted footage and an additional flashback showing how Pike received his leg wound, which had never been in the American release prints. Thus restored, the film can now rightfully take its place among the classics of the American cinema and among the essential works of the Western genre.

PECKINPAH AND THE WESTERN

With *The Wild Bunch*, Peckinpah summarized, revised, and transcended much previous work in this genre. Peckinpah's West is a much nastier, dirtier place than the polite, sanitized

frontier of previous Westerns. Peckinpah's reshaping of the genre is apparent in the film's extraordinary violence and in its jaundiced presentation of character. The bounty hunters T.C. (L.Q. Jones) and Coffey (Strother Martin), for example, are gleeful partners in filth and depravity ("Help me get his boots, T.C.!",) and their lusty celebration of theft, corpse mutilation, and back-shooting went well beyond established genre conventions of taste and decorum. (Sergio Leone's cynical, brutal spaghetti Westerns had helped prepare the way.) They go happily off to their doom, loaded down with fresh corpses, singing "Polly Wolly Doodle," in one of the most memorable exits in the history of American film.

Peckinpah was one of the last great directors of Westerns for clear and good reasons. The classic Western filmmakers, such as John Ford, took the West seriously. They knew its geography first-hand and had a sincere commitment to, and belief in, its mythic symbolism. When Wyatt Earp escorts Clementine to the church services in John Ford's *My Darling Clementine* (1943), the surpassing beauty of this simply filmed scene is due to Ford's conviction about the resonance and meaning of the mythic imagery he has fashioned. The half-built church dwarfed by the barrenness of the surrounding desert and mountains eloquently visualizes the fragility of civilization in a harsh land and the hope for progress that the church embodies. Ford took the Western seriously because he believed in its materials and rituals and in the idea of the West as the crucible of the nation, an outlook on which the genre rests.

For Peckinpah, too, the West was a living reality, though one that he regarded and interpreted very differently than Ford. Peckinpah was born in 1925 into a family of prominent California lawyers, and he spent his boyhood summering at his grandfather's sprawling ranch in the Sierra Nevadas, where he learned to hunt, ride, and herd his grandfather's cattle. The area was still rough in those days, with old-time cowboys and prospectors hanging around, spinning yarns and tall tales, and with nearby towns with colorful names like Coarsegold and Finegold, a naming tradition that Peckinpah incorporated into his films (*Ride the High Country's* Coarsegold and *The Ballad of Cable Hogue's* Gila and Dead Dog).

Meeting the old-timers, imbibing their stories, learning to shoot and hunt from his grandfather, and learning that the high country was a place of pristine beauty that embodied and engendered a rigorously virtuous moral philosophy ("Pick that up. These mountains don't need your trash," the hero tells a young whipper-snapper and litterbug in *Ride the High Country*) – these youthful experiences were extremely influential on Peckinpah's imagination, his veneration for the West, and particularly the melancholy tone that his Westerns assume. After his grandfather died, Peckinpah's mother sold the ranch. The loss of this property was a paradigmatic experience for young Sam and for his saddened perception that the West he knew and loved had vanished. In his interviews and recorded remarks, Peckinpah continually returned to the theme of the ranch's significance and the disturbing impact of its loss. "I grew up on a ranch. But that world is gone. . . . I feel rootless, completely. It's disturbing, very much so. But there's nothing you can do about it, nothing."³⁰ Peckinpah grasped the connection between the nostalgia he felt for the good times on his grandfather's ranch and his sensitivity for the Western genre and his skill for working within it. "I am a child of the old West," he said. "I knew at first hand the life of cowboys, I participated in some of their adventures and I actually witnessed the disintegration of a world. It was then inevitable that I should speak of it one day through a genre which is itself slowly dying: the Western."³¹

The Western genre permitted Peckinpah to show nostalgically the eclipse of what he considered to be a more primitive but vital world and to show caustically and critically the kind of modernity and progress that replaced it. *The Wild Bunch* is located at just such a transitional time, in 1913, on the eve of World War I, a holocaust of mechanized slaughter that was a clear harbinger of the modern brutalities of the twentieth century. The machine gun that wreaks such havoc in the film's climax embodies the modern technologies of violence that, Peckinpah believed, had so deformed contemporary life and were partly responsible for systematic savageries like the Vietnam War, a conflict he bitterly opposed. The Bunch, led by Pike Bishop, are outlaws of an old West

who refuse to change with the times. Pike says, "We gotta start thinking beyond our guns," but they cannot do so. They must die with their world as a measure of the scorn that Peckinpah feels for a modern, corporate America and as a gesture of the integrity with which they embody his nostalgia for a vanquished era. "We represent the law," snarls the capitalist Harrigan just after he instigates the massacre in San Rafael, signaling his own corruption and that of the business empire he represents and the legal institutions he controls. Like the machine gun, Harrigan's boast emblemizes the looming historical forces – the concentration of ruthless political and economic power sustained by violence – that Peckinpah believed posed a significant antidemocratic threat in the twentieth century.

But counterposed to the incipient bleakness of the modern era in the film is a band of killers. As an ironist, Peckinpah provides no explicit moral condemnation of these characters. He expects that viewers will recognize their morally problematic nature. Except for Angel, Pike and his gang are aging outlaws, no longer as fast or smart as they used to be. That they will be losers in this historical contest is inevitable. It is the manner of their losing that commands such extraordinary interest in the film. This is partly due to the intense bond Peckinpah felt for these characters. "The outlaws of the West have always fascinated me," he remarked. "They were strong individuals, in a land for all intents and purposes without law, they made their own. I suppose I'm something of an outlaw myself. I identify with them. . . . I've always wondered what happened to the outlaw leaders of the Old West when it changed."³² Yet despite this attachment he also recognized that these men are "limited and adolescent, they're not too bright."³³

Furthermore, and most strikingly, he realized that despite their being violent bandits and despite the shattering effects of the film's graphic bloodshed, many viewers would grow attached to the Bunch and lament their passing. "The strange thing is you feel a great sense of loss when these killers reach the end of the line," Peckinpah said. This is because the film forecloses on the future of America, already in the clutches of Harrigan and his ilk, and

**FIGURE 7**

Flawed heroes caught in a period of historical transition, Pike and his gang die and are reborn into legend.

because the Bunch, in their violence and vitality and renegade individualism, represent the mythological center of the American spirit. Like most of Peckinpah's other Westerns (*Ride the High Country*, *The Ballad of Cable Hogue* [1970], *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* [1973]), *The Wild Bunch* deals with flawed heroes caught in a period of historical transition. They cannot change with the times, and their violent resistance to the forces of historical change (embodied in Harrigan and Mohr, the German military advisor working for Mapache, who represents the approach of World War I and, beyond it, the modern era) works, in the film's mythography, to validate the idea of a vanished West and a frontier that no longer exists, save, symbolically for these wild gringos, in Mexico.

The Western emerged as a genre in theater and literature (and

subsequently in cinema) in the late 1880s at a time when the frontier was declared closed. Thus, the genre is inherently a melancholy one, dealing at its most profound level with a world that no longer exists and had ceased to do so when the genre took off.

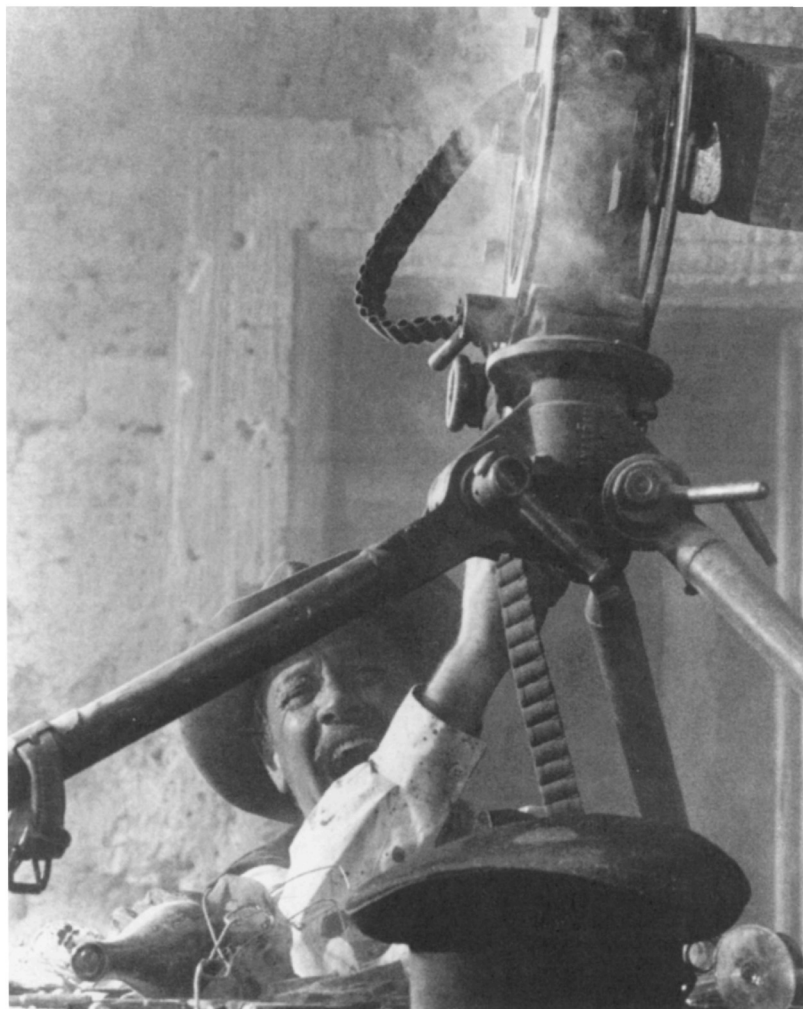


FIGURE 8

Peckinpah showed the agony of violence with greater intensity than any previous American filmmaker.

Few films, though, have shown the death throes of an era with the passion and intensity of *The Wild Bunch*. When the Bunch go down in Aqua Verde, the film laments the passing of that robust vitality in the American heart and soul that Harrigan and all of his dollars and machinery will choke and stamp out. As these outlaws die and are reborn into legend in the film's closing moments, the loss viewers feel is connected to the renegade self in the national heritage that has been repressed and displaced by the bureaucracy and technology of today. Peckinpah was right, then, when he said that the Western was about now. "The Western is a universal frame within which it is possible to comment on today."³⁴ This helps ensure the continuing relevance of *The Wild Bunch*. It is not an old, dated movie. It remains fresh and vibrant today because viewers can see in it a vexing reflection upon, and a striking visualization of, the connection between an eclipsed national past and a disturbing present.

PECKINPAH AND SCREEN VIOLENCE

No feature of *The Wild Bunch* was more notorious in its day, and continues to be so, than its unprecedentedly graphic and sustained violence. Audience reactions to the film split on this issue. Some viewers at initial sneak previews of the picture were outraged, writing on their response cards "Nauseating, unending, offensive bloody violence" and "It's plain sadism. Only a sadist or one who is mentally deranged would enjoy this film."³⁵ Others believed the picture was making an antiviolence point. "The really shocking horror of this mass killing definitely makes one think." "I hope the viciousness of the fights stays in the film so people can really know how bad killing is."³⁶ Peckinpah noted these divergent responses and replied in a letter to a friend who had criticized the film's brutality that "better than 50% of the people who saw the picture felt as you did. However, better than 30% of the people thought it was an outstanding and much needed statement against violence."³⁷

Peckinpah's intention, which he stated on many occasions,

was to use film to show audiences how awful violence is. However, he also realized that by stylizing violence, using slow motion and montage editing, he could render it poetically fascinating and aesthetically attractive. He noted that "in *The Wild Bunch* I wanted to show that violence could be at the same time repulsive and fascinating."³⁸ He thus placed viewers in an uncomfortable position, stimulating them to respond excitedly to, while recoiling morally from, the film's graphic bloodletting. In contrast to the cartoon violence of today's Arnold Schwarzenegger action films in which violence carries no pain, Peckinpah's screen violence hurts, and it is situated within a context of loss and sadness that works against the exciting stylistics of the montage editing. The Aqua Verde massacre is framed by the scene of Pike's alcoholic despair, as he silently reflects upon his wasted, failed life, and by the magnificent vulture kingdom imagery that follows the massacre as the maimed, dispossessed survivors hobble past the camera while the vultures feast on their inheritance.

Peckinpah aimed to bring suffering back to movie violence, and in doing this, he responded to the artificiality of previous decades of screen violence in which killing was quick, polite, and carried no sting. "*The Wild Bunch* was my way of reacting against all the films in which violence seemed facile, factitious and unreal. I was always fascinated to see how one died easily in the movies. . . . People die without suffering and violence provokes no pain."³⁹ As I discuss more fully in *Savage Cinema: Sam Peckinpah and the Rise of Ultra-Violent Movies*,⁴⁰ Peckinpah aimed to bring the nastiness and painfulness of violence onto the American screen in a way that would align film with the social realities of the traumatic violence sweeping America in the form of the Vietnam War, urban riots, and political assassinations. Peckinpah shared his nation's grieving, shocked response to these events, and he thus insisted that the violence in *The Wild Bunch* carry the disturbing force of human pain and anguish.

At the same time, he and editor Lou Lombardo stylized the gun battles in a highly artificial way by intercutting the multiple, ongoing lines of action and by employing slow motion to impose a

different time scheme on the action and to render it balletic. Peckinpah's insertion of brief slow-motion shots into the body of a normal tempo scene derives from the work of Akira Kurosawa (*Seven Samurai* [1954]) and Arthur Penn (*Bonnie and Clyde* [1967]), and the slow-motion inserts create a dynamic contrast with, and are energized by, the surrounding normal-tempo imagery. While Peckinpah continued to use slow motion in scenes of violence throughout his subsequent career (indeed, his work is closely identified with this device), the slow motion in *The Wild Bunch* is integrated into montages of great structural complexity (many critics erroneously claim that the cutting here is similar to Eisenstein's work in *Battleship Potemkin*). Much of this complexity, and the exhilaration it produces in the viewer, are due to the way Peckinpah and Lombardo "mesh" together the separate lines of action⁴¹ into a collage of colliding events. In this design, they slow down, interrupt, parallel, and return to ongoing lines of action. In the film's opening massacre, the Bunch have just robbed the depot and are being fired upon by the rooftop snipers. The outlaws return the fire, hitting two victims on the rooftop. The editing parallels the falls of both rooftop victims by cross-cutting between them, but it also interrupts these actions by cutting away to other ongoing events. As victim one topples forward, off the roof, the first cutaway appears, a shot of Pike running out of the depot office. The next shot returns to a continuation of the previous action as victim one falls below the bottom of the frame. The next three shots are cutaways to other lines of action – Angel running out of the depot office, the rooftop snipers, and several of the Bunch shooting at the snipers from inside the depot. After these three cutaways, the editing returns to victim one, now falling in slow motion.

The next three shots are more cutaways, but they now also introduce the fate of the second rooftop victim. In the first cutaway, a medium shot shows the Bunch firing from inside the depot. Then, in the next shot, the second rooftop victim is struck and falls forward. Next, a medium shot shows Angel running from the depot, firing, continuing an action introduced six shots previously.

The next shot, in slow motion, returns to the first victim, continuing his protracted descent to earth. Next, the montage cuts to the second victim still toppling forward but not off the roof. His fall will be broken by the rooftop ledge. A medium close-up shows Deke Thornton shooting from the roof. Then, in the next two shots, both victims land simultaneously, in a matched cut, victim one in the street and victim two on the rooftop ledge.

The complexity of this editing takes us a long way from simple realism. The editing parallels the fates of both victims but introduces a highly artificial stylistic transformation of the action. The action cuts away from the fall of victim one four times, initially for one shot, then for three shots, again for three shots, and finally for two shots. Two cutaways interrupt the fall of the second victim for two shots each time. These cutaways and the slow motion markedly distort the time and space of the represented action. The editing creates a false parallel between the fates of the two victims because the relationships of time that prevail between these events are impossible. Victim one falls off the roof in slow motion and victim two falls at normal speed, yet they strike ledge and street at precisely the same moment, as the matched cut that closes off these events indicates. The simultaneous impact of the two victims represents an impossible time-space relationship within the sequence, yet Peckinpah and Lombardo convincingly intercut normal speed and slow motion to extend this discontinuity of time and space. This is certainly an example of what Peckinpah meant when he rejected allegations that his work represented a greater realism, stressing instead that it stylized violence, heightening it through an elaborate artistic transformation.

The film's montage editing adds tremendous excitement to its action sequences, yet, as several of this volume's authors point out, Peckinpah's use of montage to turn screen violence into an exciting spectacle tended to counteract his expressed intent to show viewers how powerful and nasty real violence could be. In *The Wild Bunch*, Peckinpah tends to get caught in the spectacle of violence as he evokes it through editing and slow motion. Thus evoked, it becomes a redemptive and heroic rite of passage for his



FIGURE 9

Peckinpah continued to explore the ugliness and pain of violence in his subsequent works, especially the horrific *Straw Dogs*.

band of outlaws, enabling them to achieve a warrior's apotheosis. This is a long way from Peckinpah's alternate desire to show the horror of violence. That does not come through consistently in this film because, in the Aqua Verde climax, the Bunch's suicidal gambit to reclaim Angel is both heroic and redemptive.

Peckinpah's subsequent films are more successful than *The Wild Bunch* at showing the psychological waste and pain that violence begets. *Straw Dogs* (1971), widely misunderstood by the critics, offers a horrific vision of how emotional rage and physical violence corrupt and destroy the possibilities of human love and interconnection. The narrative of a meek college professor slaughtering a gang of thugs that tries to break into his house conspicuously lacks the transcendent heroics of the violence in *The Wild Bunch*. At the end of this bleak and icy film, the professor's house is a shambles, he is estranged from his wife, and he is alienated

and adrift in strange and dark psychological territory. Violence has unhinged his world, and horror, not transcendence, is the result.

With *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* (1973), Peckinpah returned to the Western (*The Ballad of Cable Hogue*, also a Western, was comic and largely nonviolent) and the place of violence on the frontier. Unlike in *The Wild Bunch*, though, Peckinpah avoids extended and exciting montage spectacles of choreographed slaughter. In its style and narrative, the film is a fatigued, weary contemplation of Garrett's psychological and physical self-destruction, ensuing from his decision to hunt and kill his friend in return for money and what he thinks will be a secure future. The film's climactic image of Garrett, after he has killed the Kid, shooting his mirrored reflection and then gazing at himself through the shattered glass, is Peckinpah's most poetic image of the mutilation of human potential by violence. In his next film, *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia* (1974), Peckinpah showed, more bleakly than ever before, the perversion of human identity that accompanies the use of violence. A down-on-his-luck musician agrees to cut off the head of a corpse in order to collect a bounty placed on the head, but his bloody quest destroys everything in his life and leads him, in turn, to the grave. Again, the visual pyrotechnics of *The Wild Bunch* are conspicuously absent because Peckinpah realized after that film that extended scenes of uncontrolled spectacle were inconsistent with the sober and tragic portraits of human violence that he wished to evoke in *Straw Dogs*, *Pat Garrett* and *Alfredo Garcia*.

His work after *Alfredo Garcia* is marred by a consistently bad choice of scripts. The narrative problems in these scripts were so severe that they corrupted the resulting productions. *The Killer Elite* (1975), *Cross of Iron* (1977), *Convoy* (1978), and *The Osterman Weekend* (1983) achieve only fitful moments of narrative coherence and stylistic grace, and they collectively demonstrate Peckinpah's rapid artistic decline and failure to sustain a career as a major American director.

The Wild Bunch, therefore, finds Peckinpah at the summit of his powers and on the threshold of an incredible, if short-lived, burst of productivity that saw the release of seven remarkable

films (*The Wild Bunch*, *The Ballad of Cable Hogue*, *Straw Dogs*, *Junior Bonner* [1972], *The Getaway* [1972], *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*, and *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia*) in six years. These were the peak years of Peckinpah's career, and he audaciously announced their onset with his definitive revision of the Western. As we have seen, Peckinpah's attitudes toward the screen violence he orchestrates in *The Wild Bunch* are not clearly worked out and have not yet achieved the coherence they would have in his later work. But, despite this, Peckinpah went places in this film that directors before him had not dared to go or had been permitted to go by the industry.

In *The Wild Bunch*, Peckinpah pushed violence as far as it could go within the confines of the Western, a genre in which control, discipline, and restraint, embodied in the ritual of the gunfight, had always conditioned the display of violence. Substituting for them the orgiastic frenzy of the film's opening and closing gun battles, with their mass killing, Peckinpah took violence in *The Wild Bunch* to the outer edge of what was permissible and possible in the Western. With more of the mechanized mass slaughter that caps the film at Aqua Verde, the filmmaker and viewer would find themselves in a different genre, one, like the war film or gangster film, that can accommodate more sophisticated technologies of violence and a higher body count than can the Western. By amplifying the level of violence, and by detailing the impact of bullets on flesh and the eruptions of blood, intercutting slow-motion with normal-speed imagery, Peckinpah established (but did not invent) the essential cinematic stylistics that virtually all filmmakers today employ when they present graphic violence. He also showed how powerful it could be to place bad characters at the center of a narrative, and long before *Pulp Fiction* (1995) and *Natural Born Killers* (1995) (which take special delight in their bad boy and bad girl characters), he showed the searing potential of an authorial voice fixed in irony and cynicism. There is American cinema before *The Wild Bunch*, and there is American cinema after *The Wild Bunch*. This before and after are two very different places, and Peckinpah, more than any other filmmaker

of the period, took industry and audience from the one to the other.

THE ESSAYS AND REVIEWS

The richness of *The Wild Bunch* is evident in the range of discussion contained in the following essays. The authors bring a variety of critical and historical perspectives to bear on the film, but while each recognizes the film's centrality for postwar American cinema, they offer differing explanations for its importance.

Every film begins with a script during the vital pre-production phase of filmmaking. Paul Seydor traces the evolution of the film's script and discusses Peckinpah's collaboration with his screenwriters. In filming this picture, Peckinpah went well beyond the scripted material, and Seydor shows the extent to which the film originated on paper and how Peckinpah enlarged and embellished it during production. Seydor offers a valuable dissection of the film's evolution from page to screen.

Though it is a Western, *The Wild Bunch* transcends its genre. Peckinpah noted that he was using the Western to speak about the world of today. The next two essays show how he did this. Christopher Sharrett and Michael Bliss offer provocative accounts of *The Wild Bunch* as a portrait of America. Sharrett examines the vision of society contained in *The Wild Bunch*, arguing that Peckinpah was a politically radical director and his film a scathing critique of the ideals and the failures of American society. Sharrett argues that the film remains vital and contemporary because it is "more than homage for a dead past; it is a recognition of how that past was probably always a deceit."

Michael Bliss offers a differing interpretation of this film's vision of American society, and he locates a concrete basis for the film's portrait in the way that Peckinpah's visual design structures physical space in the film's shots and scenes. Proceeding from a discussion of how Peckinpah's screen space encloses and traps the characters, Bliss explores the ethical, social, and historical implications of this design, particularly in the predatory behaviors en-

acted by each of the film's main groups of characters – the Bunch, Harrigan and his bounty hunters, and Mapache and his army.

The next two essays place the film in historical context according to issues of style and genre. David Cook examines the history of movie gunplay in relation to *The Wild Bunch* and how the film helped inaugurate a new style of “ballistic balletics” that has now become the normative method of presenting screen violence. Cook places the film in relation to the cultural factors and film industry regulations that helped sanitize screen violence in earlier decades, and he then explains why the limits on what was permissible to show on screen changed so decisively in the late sixties. Throughout his historical discussion, Cook emphasizes the “uneasy relationship between spectators and on-screen gunplay that has been tempered by the cultural/political status of real armed violence in American society.”

Wheeler Winston Dixon places the film in relation to the traditions and conventions of the Western genre, as Peckinpah inherited that genre when he began work on the film and as he transformed and recast it in ways that could not be undone by subsequent filmmakers.

In the final essay, Devin McKinney takes a provocatively different view of *The Wild Bunch*. McKinney accepts that the film deserves the extraordinary critical fascination it has received, but he argues that it is not the masterpiece it is generally considered to be. He finds that the film's style of violence – the slow motion and montage editing – “still communicates death in a way that is both insanely urgent and reflectively distanced.” But, he argues, Peckinpah retreated from the radical implications of this style by telling a story that retains the conventional melodrama and sentimentality of ordinary Hollywood pictures and he was unable, in this film, to get beyond the treatment of death as a purely visual phenomenon.

These authors have the advantage of writing about *The Wild Bunch* as a film they have known and lived with for years. By contrast, newspaper and magazine movie reviewers must write about their immediate response to a new film that they have just seen.

In the concluding section of this volume, the reviewers for *Time* magazine and *The New York Times* provide an assessment of the film upon its initial release in 1969. Consequently, their reactions are more hurried, and they cannot (yet) assess the film's place in cinema history. The reviews, though, tell us much about the immediate responses of first-time viewers. Each of the reviewers spends considerable time talking about the impact of the film's extraordinary violence. While both reviewers recognize the audacious visual style of the picture, the reader will note that neither reviewer yet saw that this film would become a modern classic. Vincent Canby's closing remark, in the first *Times* piece reprinted here, that the film did not induce him to commit real violence once outside the theater was meant as a rejoinder to the controversies about the effects of movie violence that this film, and *Bonnie and Clyde* two years earlier, had helped trigger.

Canby and the reviewer for *Time* both complain about the awkwardness with which the film's flashback material was introduced. Both critics had seen the initial, complete American assembly of the film, but Warners–Seven Arts quickly withdrew this version from distribution, replacing it with a shorter version that lacked the flashbacks, one additional entire scene (Villa's attack on Mapache), and some of the material from the scene where the Bunch visit Angel's village. This abbreviated version of the film became the only one that viewers could see for many years. In the second article, Vincent Canby laments the loss of this footage, discusses the studio's reasons for making the cuts, and compares his reactions to both versions.

The outrage of many critics and viewers, who were appalled at the ferocity of the film's bloodshed, is vividly recorded in the press conference held by Peckinpah, the producer, and the cast of the film in June 1969 following a preview screening for newspaper and magazine movie reviewers. The reader will note the hostility of the questioning that Peckinpah and his associates endured and the way that the Vietnam War, then ongoing, formed a background and context for the discussion, occasioning Peckinpah's memorable proclamation, "The Western is a universal frame within

which it is possible to talk about today.” No better explanation for the film’s enduring importance can be offered.

NOTES

The Sam Peckinpah Collection is housed at the Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Los Angeles.

- 1 Marshall Fine, *Bloody Sam: The Life and Films of Sam Peckinpah* (New York: Donald I. Fine, Inc., 1991), p. 153.
- 2 Sam Peckinpah Collection, Correspondence – Don Siegel, folder no. 89.
- 3 Sam Peckinpah Collection, Correspondence – misc., letter of 9/30/60, folder no. 18.
- 4 Sam Peckinpah Collection, *Major Dundee* – Jerry Bresler correspondence, folder no. 8.
- 5 Sam Peckinpah Collection, *Major Dundee*, letter of 3/23/65, folder no. 18.
- 6 Sam Peckinpah Collection, Correspondence – Charlton Heston, letter of 8/6/68, folder no. 46.
- 7 Sam Peckinpah Collection, *The Wild Bunch* – Peckinpah memos, memo of 10/12/67, folder no. 62.
- 8 All of the information about the film’s shooting schedule is derived from the daily production log, Sam Peckinpah Collection, *Wild Bunch* production reports, folder no. 84.
- 9 Sam Peckinpah Collection, *The Wild Bunch* – Peckinpah memos, memo of 5/6/68, folder no. 62.
- 10 Ibid., memo of 5/18/68.
- 11 Ibid., memo of 5/20/68.
- 12 Ibid., memo of 6/13/68.
- 13 Ibid., memo of 5/9/68.
- 14 Sam Peckinpah Collection, Feldman memos, memo of 8/5/68, folder no. 45.
- 15 Sam Peckinpah Collection, *The Wild Bunch* – Peckinpah memos, memo of 10/25/68, folder no. 62.
- 16 Ibid., memo of 5/3/69.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Sam Peckinpah Collection, *Wild Bunch* – Feldman memos, memo of 2/1/69, folder no. 46.
- 19 Sam Peckinpah Collection, *Wild Bunch* – Peckinpah memos, memo of 5/3/69, folder no. 62.

- 20 Sam Peckinpah Collection, Feldman memos, letter of 1/30/68 from MPAA's Geoffrey Shurlock, folder no. 45.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Sam Peckinpah Collection, Feldman memos, letter of 3/17/69, folder no. 46.
- 26 Ibid., letter of 4/8/69, folder no. 46.
- 27 Ibid., memo of 2/9/68, folder no. 45.
- 28 Ibid., memo of 5/13/69, folder no. 46.
- 29 Sam Peckinpah Collection, Correspondence – Lucien Ballard, letter of 10/21/80, folder no. 5.
- 30 Dan Yergin, "Peckinpah's Progress," *The New York Times Magazine*, Oct. 31, 1971, p. 92.
- 31 Sam Peckinpah Collection, *Le Devoir* interview, Oct. 10, 1974, folder no. 96.
- 32 Stephen Farber, "Peckinpah's Return," *Film Quarterly* 23, no. 1 (Fall, 1969), p. 9.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 "Press Violent About Film's Violence, Prod Sam Peckinpah Following 'Bunch'," *Variety*, July 2, 1969, p. 15.
- 35 Sam Peckinpah Collection, folder no. 74, 75.
- 36 Ibid.
- 37 Sam Peckinpah Collection, *Wild Bunch* – response letters, letter of May 13, 1969, folder no. 92.
- 38 Sam Peckinpah Collection, *Le Devoir* interview, folder no. 96.
- 39 Ibid.
- 40 Stephen Prince, *Savage Cinema: Sam Peckinpah and the Rise of Ultraviolent Movies* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998).
- 41 Lombardo described his work as the meshing or intercutting of the separate lines of action. See David Weddle, *If They Move . . . Kill 'Em* (New York: Grove Press, 1994), p. 355.

I ***The Wild Bunch:*** **The Screenplay**

Any script that's written changes at least thirty percent from the time you begin preproduction: ten percent while you fit your script to what you discover about your locations, ten percent while your ideas are growing as you rehearse your actors who must grow into their parts because the words mean nothing alone, and ten percent while the film is finally being edited. It may change more than this but rarely less.

Sam Peckinpah

I

If ever there was a film that absolutely demonstrates the validity of the auteur theory as it is commonly understood – that the director is the “author” of a film – it is surely *The Wild Bunch*. Of the hundreds of pieces written about this film, I can't think of a single one that doesn't rest upon – indeed, that even thinks of questioning – the assumption that it is, first, last, and always, Peckinpah's and only Peckinpah's creation. Yet he did not come up with the original story, nor did he write the first screenplay.

And though he did a substantial rewrite that transformed the material, amazingly little is known for certain about how the project began or, for that matter, about the precise contours of the way he developed the story and made it his own. What did he keep, what did he drop, what did he change, invent, or reinvent for himself?

For a long time these questions were unanswerable in any detail because the requisite materials, namely, the various versions and drafts of the screenplay, were scattered around and unavailable. However, in 1986, two years after his death, Peckinpah's family donated his papers to the Margaret Herrick Library of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in Beverly Hills, California. There was a daunting amount of material that took the research archivist Valentin Almendarez four years to sort, organize, and file. But since 1990 the Peckinpah Collection has been available to members of the Academy and anyone else who cares to make an appointment with the library's Special Collections department. The papers are filed in folders kept in numbered boxes measuring about 15 × 12 × 10 inches. The Peckinpah Collection fills ninety-five boxes and has an annotated inventory that requires 164 pages just to list, briefly describe, and cross reference each document to its box number.¹ Five and a half pages are devoted to the *The Wild Bunch* alone, and two boxes, numbers 30 and 31, contain treatments and several drafts of the screenplay.

They make for fascinating reading, exciting discoveries, but they do not yield their treasures easily. Peckinpah's hand – he rarely used pens, only pencils – is a nearly indecipherable hodgepodge of writing and printing. Judging from the drafts in the Collection, his typical practice was to scribble changes over or in the margin next to passages he wanted to revise, continuing on the back of the page at the same relative spot, down to the bottom, up to the unused space at the top, then onto the backs of other pages if necessary.² Tracking the revisions is both thrilling – the heat of inspiration is sometimes palpable – and challenging, as the effort required to decipher the scrawl is considerable. (Peckinpah did not do his own typing, and your heart goes out to his typists.)

But the rewards are worth it. They lead us, for example, to the

exact moment when Peckinpah began to conceive of the Bunch in mythic terms, in two key places in the draft dated 16 June 1967. When Pike climbs back onto his horse after the stirrup strap has broken, Peckinpah added a sentence: "He turns and rides toward the mountains, the men following." The description is deceptively simple, the moment almost thrown away, yet it led to the lovely epiphany of the beleaguered outlaw riding over the dune. The other is the celebrated walk to retrieve Angel, missing from the original but scribbled onto these pages, three pregnant sentences that became perhaps the greatest filming of a Western convention in the history of motion pictures:

THEY CROSS TO THEIR HORSES, THEIR DRUNKENNESS LESS-
ENING with every step.

Pike and Dutch pull rifles or shotguns from their saddle scabbards as do Lyle and Tector, then they move up the village street.

FOUR MEN IN LINE AND THE AIR OF IMPENDING VIOLENCE
IS SO STRONG around them that as they pass through the celebrating soldiers, the song and the laughter begin to die.³

At the time *The Wild Bunch* came out, Peckinpah played down both the epic aspirations and the romantic feelings of his greatest film. He hated pretentiousness, he didn't want to come out pompous or high-sounding, and he had not forgotten the drubbing he had taken four years earlier for what several critics perceived as o'er reaching ambition in the ill-fated *Major Dundee* (1965). But the way he developed the screenplay and eventually shot the film demonstrates pretty clearly that the largeness of vision in *The Wild Bunch*, its epic romanticism, did not happen by accident. However gradually it may have developed, it was something he saw in the material from the moment he first read the script, something he started building in from the moment he began rewriting it.

But this gets us ahead of our story, which begins with Peckinpah's previous film, *Major Dundee*.⁴

II

Roy Sickner was a stuntman at the top of his profession by the time he accepted a job as Richard Harris's double for the action sequences in *Major Dundee*. Sickner had regularly ridden stunts for Marlon Brando, Yul Brynner, Rod Taylor, and others. Classically handsome in the rugged Western mode, he was the first "Marlboro man" in the cigarette commercials. But he had ambitions of producing, his dream to do a big violent Western movie, heavy on stunts and elaborate action set pieces, starring his close friend Lee Marvin. Sickner and a friend of his, Chuck Hayward, also a stuntman, came up with a story about a gang of outlaws involved in escapades on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border. Sickner pitched the idea to Peckinpah on the *Dundee* location in Mexico in 1964. Sometime in 1965 Marvin expressed a keen interest in a property attached to Sickner that was called *The Wild Bunch*.

This is just about all that is known with any certainty about the early history of *The Wild Bunch*. What shape it had at the very beginning is anybody's guess because nothing was written down and the evidence is largely anecdotal, most of it recollections by parties once or more removed. Of the three early principals, Peckinpah and Marvin are dead, and Sickner is too incapacitated to be of help.⁵ As best the story can be pieced together, Sickner returned from Mexico soon after pitching the idea to Peckinpah, excited to get his ideas on paper but inundated with offers for more work, which he accepted.⁶ He was so restless and energetic that his attention span was, to put it mildly, limited under the best of circumstances. His friends loved him, but he was the original "man's man," a wild and, when drunk, quite literally crazy and sometimes mean guy who did everything to excess – drinking, smoking, womanizing, gambling, spending, brawling, and just plain hell-raising. Like most movie-industry dreams, his would have remained unfulfilled and probably been forgotten entirely except for a change in the fortunes of Marvin's career. To the surprise of virtually everyone, including himself, he won the 1965 Academy Award as best actor for his dual performance as the drunken gun-

fighter and the villain in the comedy Western *Cat Ballou*. Before this a character actor known for playing villains and other tough lowlifes (he was Liberty Valance in John Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* [1962]), all of a sudden he found himself a star. His next picture was Richard Brooks's *The Professionals* (1966), a big-budget, star-driven Western that, like *Cat Ballou*, became a huge hit. Now Marvin wasn't just a star; he was a star whose mere interest could get a project off the ground. And he was still interested in *The Wild Bunch*.

Suddenly Sickner needed a screenwriter, as nobody, even a pal like Marvin, was going to commit to anything without a screenplay. Whatever his abilities, Sickner was no writer; he couldn't even manage a treatment (in industry parlance, a detailed synopsis of the story in narrative form, usually between twenty and fifty pages). Enter Walon Green, a documentary filmmaker in his early thirties, eager to break into writing features.⁷ Green and Sickner had met in 1964 when Green was a dialogue director on *Saboteur: Code Name Morituri*, where Sickner was doubling stunts for the picture's star, Marlon Brando. A year later Sickner was directing the second unit on *Winter à Go-Go*, a low-budget comedy in need of a script polish. Sickner recommended Green to the producer, Reno Carell, who hired the writer. It was around this time that Sickner pitched his idea for *The Wild Bunch* to Carell, with Sickner himself as director. With the producer's interest and presumably his backing, Sickner offered Green \$1,500 to write a treatment. "Roy came over to my house," Green recalls,

and I remember, I had this little reel-to-reel tape recorder, and Roy dictated an outline of the plot. As best I can remember, it went something like this: these guys rob a train depot in Texas, then run across the border to Mexico with a posse chasing them. They meet some Mexican bandits who hire them to steal guns from the US army. The outlaws steal the guns, sell them to the Mexicans, and then take off. The Mexicans, who planned a double-cross all along, pursue the outlaws, eventually catching up with them just as the railroad posse closes in from the other direction. The outlaws are caught in a big gun fight that ends the movie.

From this sketch Green wrote a treatment, then the screenplay. When Carell had a budget breakdown done of the script and was informed that the picture would cost about \$4 million, ten times the highest budget his company could manage, he passed. Sickner then shopped it around elsewhere, meeting with varying degrees of interest but no firm offers. Meanwhile, Green went back to directing documentaries and soon lost track of it altogether. He was not even aware that it was about to go into production at Warner Brothers until a friend read an item in the trade papers and phoned him.

The story Sickner dictated to Green was bare almost beyond skeletal, and to say that Green fleshed it out is hugely to understate the magnitude of his efforts. Even the plot, which Green, a remarkably generous, rather self-effacing man, has always credited to Sickner, needed extensive development (the whole last part following the exchange of rifles, for example, is unrecognizable even as a blueprint for the completed film). None of the characters had names, few of them were individuated enough to be called characters as such, and Thornton, Angel, and Old Sykes (among others) Green doesn't remember existing at all. It goes almost without saying that there was no suggestion of the complex relationships among the several characters and groups that distinguish the film.

Sickner had set the story in the early 1880s, but Green told him there wasn't much happening in Mexico at that time and changed it to 1911–13 (which made possible the twin themes of the end of an era and the West in transition that Peckinpah inflected so powerfully). Next Green turned to the plot. His first alteration was to have the sacks the Bunch steal at the beginning turn out to be filled with washers instead of the gold Sickner had dictated. Though apparently small, this change had large implications. Having just pulled a robbery that nets them nothing and puts a posse on their trail, the Bunch can't return to the States and are thus forced deeper into Mexico, where, out of money, they hire themselves out on a job that eventually embroils them in a civil war. Overall Green made the plot both more elaborate and more tightly knit.

He also tied the story much more closely to its milieu by creating Angel, his village, and by extension all the scenes involving Angel and the revolution (except those later contributed by Peckinpah). Finally, he worked out a much more satisfactory second half that included such scenes as the one where the *federales* try to take the guns without paying for them and that dispensed with such ludicrous coincidences as the Mexicans and the posse catching up with the robbers at the same time.

"The main genesis of the screenplay comes from several things," Green recalls. "I lived in Mexico and worked there for about a year and a half. *The Wild Bunch* was partly written as my love letter to Mexico" (interestingly, one of the same reasons Peckinpah later gave for wanting to make it). He continues:

I had just read Barbara Tuchman's book *The Zimmerman Telegram*, which is about the Germans' efforts to get the Americans into a war with Mexico to keep them out of Europe. I wanted to allude to some of that, so I gave Mapache German advisors whose commander says that line about how useful it would be if they knew of some Americans who didn't share their government's naive sentiments. I had also seen this amazing documentary, *Memorias de Un Mexicano*, that was shot while the revolution was actually happening – it's three hours of film taken during the revolution itself. That film had a big influence on the look of *The Wild Bunch*. I didn't know Sam at this time, but I had Roy see it, and he told me that he made Sam watch it.

To give you some idea of how important this film was for *The Wild Bunch*, you remember in my screenplay that Agua Verde was originally called Parras, which I used because it was the birthplace of Francisco Madero. But I had never been there. When the location scouts came back they told me it was just like I had described it. I can only assume that my descriptions were accurate because I probably saw some of Parras in *Memorias*.

The most obvious historical antecedent for the outlaws themselves is Butch Cassidy's Hole-in-the-Wall Gang, whom the newspapers nicknamed "the Wild Bunch" and who were chased out of the country by a posse of Pinkerton detectives. Though Green

claimed to have known almost nothing then about the history of Cassidy (see Segaloff, p. 140), his screenplay has Lyle Gorch telling Pike, "I've heard it's like the old times in Argentina . . . Butch Cassidy went there three years ago and he's making a killing . . ." (14) and mentions the Pinkertons by name (10). And while Harrigan's occupation is not absolutely clear in Green's screenplay – he doesn't seem to be an officer of the railroad – in the treatment he is positively identified as "a private agent" employed by the railroad. There are other parallels as well. When I asked Green about these, he remembered that he learned about the Cassidy history from his story conferences with Sickner (who also came up with the title). (Much later the historical parallels were strengthened by Peckinpah, e.g., *Final*, p. 21.)⁸

Though Green and Peckinpah had never met or talked with one another until the director was already shooting the picture, it is amazing how close their ideas for developing the story were. One explanation is that independently they had covered a lot of the same ground: Peckinpah was researching the Mexican Revolution for *Villa Rides* (1968), an original script he was writing at Paramount immediately prior to tackling *The Wild Bunch*.⁹ Another is that they shared a love for some of the same films and directors, in particular Huston and Kurosawa. Green specifically created the character of Freddie Sykes "as my homage to Howard, the old man played by Walter Huston in *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*. You know, everybody tried to get me to drop Sykes – *everybody* – no one liked him until Sam came along, and Sam loved him." Though he couldn't possibly have known Green's intentions, Peckinpah too saw in Howard a progenitor of Sykes and an opportunity to acknowledge a film he loved. The same coincidence operated in respect to Kurosawa. Having just seen *The Seven Samurai* (1954) and been bowled over by it, Green asked Sickner if some of the violence and action in *The Wild Bunch* might be filmed in slow motion. Unbeknownst to the writer, Peckinpah also revered Kurosawa (though much preferring *Rashomon* [1954] to *The Seven Samurai*) and had already experimented with slow motion, exposing thousands of feet of high-speed footage in *Major Dundee* (see Weddle,

pp. 243, 249–50). Although none of it made the final cut, by the time he got back to Mexico in 1968, Peckinpah clearly had this particular bit in his teeth and was champing at it with a vengeance.¹⁰

Green expended his greatest efforts on bringing the characters to life. He took unusual care assigning them names:

Thornton was named for a kid I went to grammar school with. Pike was a name I always wanted to use, it's a kind of carnivorous fish and it suggested someone who is tough and predatory. Dutch for me is a warm and comfortable-sounding name, and I wanted to indicate something of those qualities in the man. Gorch was after a real mill-trash family I knew; I don't know where I got Lyle, but Tector was a guy I cleaned swimming pools with from West Virginia. Angel is pretty obvious, he was the good guy. Mapache means raccoon in Spanish, and it seemed to me something a peasant risen to a general might call himself, after a smart but wily and devious animal. Coffey was named for a stuntman I knew named Jack Coffey who was killed. Jack was a real inspiration to me for the kind of guys who are *really* wild and crazy. Railroad men were often Irish. Harrigan was a hard-sounding Irish name that felt right for this kind of man.¹¹

In view of both the substance and the sheer number of Green's contributions, Sickner must have been aware how thoroughly his threadbare plot had been transformed into a real story, for when the treatment was registered with the Screen Writers Guild, the title page put the writer first: "*The Wild Bunch* by Walon Green from an Original Story by Roy Sickner." The on-screen credit for original story is even more decisive, attributing it to Green and Sickner in that order, suggesting that as far as the Writers Guild, which arbitrates such matters, was concerned, whatever form Sickner's story was in when it first came to Green, it required so much work as to get Green the first position.

Green's treatment, a twenty-eight-page narrative that is undated, is in the Peckinpah Collection, as is a shorter treatment, fifteen pages long and dated 28 March 1967, that is essentially a condensed version of the same narrative. Together these are the

two earliest written forms of *The Wild Bunch* known to exist. The Collection also contains a copy of Green's first screenplay, though it too is undated. The first *Wild Bunch* script to carry a date – 16 June 1967 – is nearly identical to Green's original but with some notes that appear to be in Peckinpah's hand. This copy is incomplete, as is another that has many handwritten changes on it, definitely by Peckinpah and still dated 16 June. After this there is a complete script that incorporates the handwritten changes from the previous one, also dated 16 June. Then there is a complete screenplay with a title page that reads: "*The Wild Bunch*, Written by Walon Green and Sam Peckinpah, Story by Roy Sickner. FIRST DRAFT," dated 28 June 1967.

Without some explanation, none of these dates makes sense, and the date on the shorter treatment has to be wrong. To begin with, if the date is accurate, it means that Green wrote the first screenplay and that Peckinpah read it and did his first revision all in the three months between 28 March and 28 June 1967. Practically speaking, this would have been impossible; and in any case, it can't be true because Green wrote the screenplay the previous year (perhaps ever earlier) and because Sickner shopped it a while before it was purchased by Warner Brothers.¹² The history of the project clouds up again here, particularly on the matter of Peckinpah's involvement or reinvolverment, as the case may be. Sickner said that Peckinpah not only listened carefully when he and Hayward told him their ideas on the *Major Dundee* set, but even made some suggestions. For his part, Peckinpah always said that he first heard about *The Wild Bunch* from Lee Marvin. In 1977 Peckinpah wrote me:

Roy Sickner brought me an outline of some 32 pages by Walon Green and himself, and a rough screenplay including some of the dialogue that was used in the picture. I did three drafts and submitted it to Warner Brothers. Ken Hyman bought it. I did it because Roy Sickner got some money for me from a Chicago banker. I first read it on a recommendation from Lee Marvin.¹³

Much of this is consistent with the materials in the Collection, most of which came from Peckinpah's files. The Green–Sickner

treatment is there. (Though it is twenty-eight rather than thirty-two pages, David Weddle and I both believe that it is the outline Peckinpah referred to in his letter to me and that he simply misremembered the number of pages. No thirty-two-page treatment is known to exist.) The three drafts of the screenplay, culminating in the first complete draft of 28 June 1967, are also there. The Chicago banker is one Anthony M. Ryerson, from whom Sickner got some development money that enabled him to attract Peckinpah's attention. Peckinpah's statement that he first read "it" – meaning the outline – on a recommendation from Lee Marvin jibes with remarks he made to others. As Peckinpah was usually pretty generous when it came to giving credit, it is entirely possible that his conversations with Sickner on the location of *Major Dundee* slipped his mind. Directors are always being told about "great ideas" for movies, and Peckinpah was no exception.

It is also possible that Sickner exaggerated Peckinpah's initial interest. There is almost no question that they talked about *The Wild Bunch* at least once, probably more than once, on the location of *Major Dundee*. But between Peckinpah's being fired from *The Cincinnati Kid* in December 1964 and December 1966 – a two-year period when he was effectively blacklisted by the major studios and was frantically writing to get himself a directing job (five full-length screenplays and several teleplays) – there is little to suggest that he paid more than passing attention to Sickner's pipe dream. Though Sickner's friends believe he always intended *The Wild Bunch* for Peckinpah, Sickner's attempt to sell it to Carell with himself as director demonstrates otherwise, as does Carell's brief ownership, plainly stated on the title page of Green's treatment. Indeed, for all his talk about Peckinpah's attachment, Sickner raised the money for a treatment only *after* he had managed to maneuver himself into the director's chair. And who can blame him? This was a time when nobody was hiring Peckinpah for features.¹⁴

No one can say for certain, therefore, how committed Peckinpah was to *The Wild Bunch* before he read the Green screenplay or when exactly he first acquired it.¹⁵ But it next turns up in a pile of scripts he brought with him when Ken Hyman (the Seven Arts half of Warner Brothers–Seven Arts) and Phil Feldman set him up

in a studio office to begin work on *The Diamond Story*, a modern-day action-adventure property set in Africa that was supposed to star Charlton Heston. Whenever Peckinpah acquired *The Wild Bunch*, the most likely time that he would have thought seriously about revising it is late April or May 1967. There are two reasons for this supposition. Much before that he was too busy at Paramount writing *Villa Rides*, which he didn't turn in until almost the last week in April. The other is that it wasn't until late winter or early spring that Sickner seemed to have had any real money. On 21 December 1966 a letter of agreement was drafted between Sickner and Ryerson giving Peckinpah a 25 percent share of *The Wild Bunch*, in lieu of money, for rewriting the screenplay and eventually directing it. Throughout the winter of the following year, Sickner continued negotiating with Peckinpah, whose interest by then had certainly been aroused. But he still doesn't appear to have done any actual work on the script until Sickner got him some hard money, as opposed to a promised "ownership" of a property that might never get into production.¹⁶ Still pretty strapped for cash from his two-years-plus run of bad luck, he could not afford to work on speculation.¹⁷ Once he turned to *The Wild Bunch*, however, he finished his first revision in two months – entirely possible, even likely, given how furiously he pursued anything in those months that looked as though it might land him a directing stint.

How, then, to explain the two versions of the same treatment and a date on one of them that can't be correct? It is a matter of fact that the undated longer treatment was written by Green much earlier. But Green can't remember writing the shorter one, which makes sense: if we recall that by then he had gone off to other projects and lost track of *The Wild Bunch* altogether, he probably didn't. If not Green, then who, and why? My guess – with which Green concurs – is that Peckinpah, Sickner, or someone else close to the project had Green's treatment condensed, in the process removing Carell's name, as he no longer owned it, and assigning it a date that would keep the studio from thinking it was a reject that had been lying around. (This is often done when projects

considered dead are resurrected; more often than not, the title is also changed.) As for identical dates on the director's three different copies of the Green screenplay, these were for him private working drafts only, nothing he was ready to submit to a producer or studio. He obviously felt no need to redate them each time he did some work on them. The various drafts dated 16 June are simply stages of a work-in-progress that became the 28 June screenplay. That Peckinpah considered this his first *complete* revision is evidenced by his unambiguously calling it *his* "first draft" right on the title page and taking a credit as cowriter (in the second position).¹⁸

Despite the work he was supposed to be doing on *The Diamond Story*, once he started rewriting *The Wild Bunch*, it consumed him for the remainder of spring and the whole summer. Some time in August, when *The Diamond Story* looked as if it would fall through for good and Feldman wondered what they might turn to next, Peckinpah handed him the revised *The Wild Bunch* and reminded him of Marvin's continued interest. Feldman liked what he read, liked also the director's ideas for further changes, and liked most of all the prospect of Marvin, whose brutal but exciting World War II action picture, *The Dirty Dozen*, had just recently hit the theaters to spectacular box office. Ken Hyman was likewise enthusiastic, as *The Dirty Dozen* was his last work as an independent producer before becoming head of production at Warners. Suddenly, *The Wild Bunch* was born, studio chief and producer both confident they had a "Western" *Dirty Dozen* in the making. Little did they know that their director was nurturing a quite different creature, though soon enough he would send Hyman a note that in retrospect contains some portent of how passionate and personal would be his investment: "Of all the projects I have worked on," Peckinpah declared, "this is the closest to me."¹⁹

III

The Peckinpah Collection contains several drafts of *Wild Bunch* screenplays, some complete, some not, all dated between

June 1967 and May 1968. The last changes of any sort consist of some loose pages of revisions dated 20 May 1968, by which time Peckinpah was almost two months into principal photography (which had begun on 25 March). It would be tedious, misleading, and far beyond the scope of this essay to note each and every change, revision, and addition by Peckinpah. He did so substantial a dialogue rewrite, for example, that few scenes were left untouched; but to detail every last line or word change is to indulge in minutiae that would obscure the overall pattern of his changes.²⁰ My task here is to set forth this pattern and chart the major changes by which it is defined. To this end, I have tried to keep critical commentary as such to a minimum. Readers interested in a full-length analysis that addresses many of the implications of these changes are directed to the chapter on *The Wild Bunch* in my critical study of Peckinpah's Western films (137–212).

"There was nothing elegant, witty, or slick about" the original screenplay, David Weddle has pointed out, and it lacked any "trace of romanticism" (309). This was Walon Green's intention. "I always liked Westerns," he has said, but

I always felt they were too heroic and too glamorous. I'd read enough to know that Billy the Kid shot people in the back of the head while they were drinking coffee; it had to be lot meaner than that. Plus I knew a lot of ranchers and cowboys, and they were *mean*. I wrote it, thinking that I would like to see a Western that was as mean and ugly and brutal as the times, and the only nobility in men was their dedication to each other. (Segaloff, p. 143)

This was Peckinpah's point of departure too. Ever since his television series *The Westerner* (1960), he had been obsessed with portraying cowboys, outlaws, and gunfighters as realistically as he knew how. But he seems to have realized fairly early on that men who are merely bad don't make for very interesting characters, themes, or dramas. So while he retained most of Green's grit and realism, Peckinpah developed *The Wild Bunch* in two apparently antithetical directions. In the one, he went down and in, making

it intimate and subjective, the characters and their relationships far more emotionally and psychologically compelling. In the other, he moved up and out, enlarging the scale, increasing and intensifying the conflicts, and investing what he liked to call "a simple adventure story" with an almost unprecedented richness, density, and complexity of theme and texture.

It was for a while rather fashionable to denigrate Green's *Wild Bunch*, but Peckinpah himself always spoke highly of it, saying that it set up and dramatized the story "very well" (Farber, p. 42). Green's is an exceptionally accomplished piece of work (astonishingly so for a first screenplay) that is in fact far closer to the completed film than is the norm for most original screenplays. By any standards it was an excellent start and a protean effort that gave Peckinpah the structure, the plot, the characters, and the canvas he needed to release his imagination to its fullest. Though the director added many scenes, he rarely altered the basic shape of those by Green that he kept, which was most of them.

A typical example is the famous scene when Pike's stirrup breaks. In Green, Sykes's horse stumbles on some loose stones, sending the group tumbling down a slope; an angry Tector throws a rock at the old man; the Bunch start to mount back up; Pike's stirrup breaks, sending him crashing to the ground; he lies there in pain, no one moving to help him ("he doesn't expect them to"), the Gorch brothers making "little effort to cover the fact that they enjoy Pike's misery"; Pike mounts up and tells them where they're headed; and they all ride off (27). As Peckinpah rewrote and eventually staged it, Tector doesn't just throw a rock at Sykes, he reaches for his gun, aiming to kill him; Pike stops him and delivers the famous speech about sticking together; the Gorch brothers' enjoyment of his misery is no longer silent but openly contemptuous ("How are you going to side with a man when you can't even get on your horse?"). When Pike climbs back onto his horse, he turns, not saying a word, and rides on ahead alone, the others watching without moving. Peckinpah added virtually all of the dialogue, brought out the barely latent animosities among the group, found a dramatically and psychologically plausible place

78

~~ANGLE ON SLOPE~~

70

The rock is loose and the footing extremely difficult as they start down in single file. Sykes is last, he leads his own horse and a pack animal.

Suddenly Sykes slips and loses his footing. He falls forward pulling the two horses down with him. Unable to control his slide he collides with Tector who is next in line. Tector's fall starts a chain reaction in which all the men slide to the bottom of the hill.

Picking up speed they tumble to the bottom and land in a giant cloud of dust. There is a profusion of coughing and swearing as the men and animals get to ^{stretch} their feet.

~~79~~~~GROUP SHOT~~

^{persons at}
Tector stands and looks around for Sykes.

TECTOR

You damned old idiot!

He picks up a ^{who is hit & falls backward} small stone and throws it at the old man ^{who is coughing spasmodically}. The other men ^{are brushing off their clothing and looking over their horses} ~~are brushing off their clothing and looking over their horses~~. ^{Pike grabs Tector & swings him around.}

TECTOR ^(aside)I hate old men... ~~Hating~~ ^{Comin' along} that old idiotaround is gonna get us killed. — ^{Got rid of him!}

80

~~ANGLE WITH PIKE & FG~~

^{PLEASE —}
^{— PIKE'S HANDS COMING}
^{— NO DISTURBANCE OF MOUNT — NO STICK TO OTHER}
^{— JUST LIKE IT USED TO BE WHEN RODE WITH A}
^{MAN — YOU STICK WITH HIM}
Pike has gotten to his feet. He ^{groans with the pain} ~~in his back~~ then he ~~straightens up and~~ turns to mount the horse. Placing his foot in the stirrup he stiffly starts to swing on. The leather breaks and he falls under the animal. Landing on his back he lets out a loud shriek.

81

~~PECKINPAH'S SERIES~~

The other men look down at him ^{mount}. They ~~are~~ ^{are} all mounted except for Dutch who ~~is~~ ^{is} holding his horse ^{POINT. MOV}

FIGURE 10

Figures 10–15 are typical of the way Peckinpah reworked screenplays.

Figures 10 through 13, from one of the 16 June 1967 drafts, show how Peckinpah revised and added to the scene where Pike's stirrup breaks. Note that about two-thirds of the way down page 30 (Fig. 10) is the first appearance of Pike's "when you side with a man" speech, starting on the front and continuing on the back (Fig. 11). Notice also that midway down page 31 (Fig. 12) Peckinpah has indicated an interpolation, continued on the back (Fig. 13), of new

↓ - P - (stuttering)
 if you can't do that for us then
 some American - ~~then~~ ^{then} finished -
 never finished - old is us.

FIGURE 11

dialogue by the Gorch brothers ("Riding with him and old man Sykes makes a man wonder if it ain't time to pick up his chips and find another gam," etc.).

Figures 14 and 15 are from the 26 October 1967 draft, where Peckinpah added a new scene in Thornton's camp. Coffey asks Thornton, "You rode with Pike. What kind of man we up against?" Thornton answers, "The best. He never got caught" (Fig. 15).

27

82 ~~ANGLE FROM BEHIND PIKE ON OTHERS~~ 91
~~The men watch silently while Pike struggles to his feet. None of them move forward to help him and he doesn't expect them to. He is visibly miserable as he recovers the reins of his animal and ~~strains~~ ^{strains} to raise himself into the saddle ^{the Broken Luthor}~~

83 ~~REASON FOR AND TECTOR~~
~~Lyle and Tector make little effort to cover the fact that they enjoy Pike's misery. ~~they~~ ^{grin} Tector~~

84 ~~PIKE ON SADDLE~~ ^{AS Lyle} ^{1500 seconds Pike?} ^{on Pike's animal}
~~Pike takes a few seconds to gather up the reins and positions himself. In the background Dutch swings onto his horse, as Pike speaks.~~

PIKE
 Let's go, we're about ~~four~~ ^{an} hours from the Santa Caterinas.

The men ride in the direction of a distant mountain range. It is growing dark.

~~DISSOLVE TO~~
 85 ~~ANGLE ON GROUP FEATURING PIKE~~ ^{but Bonasa the sun is out} ^{the others are}
~~None of the other men are the least bit attentive to Tector's dialogue. Pike stands, momentarily staring at a distant range of mountains on the horizon. He turns and mounts his horse.~~

PIKE
 Come on, ~~we~~

Angel steps forward and looks at the mountains.

ANGEL (to himself)
 Mexico! ^{1000!} ^{Pike looks at his mount then}

~~It is growing dark as the other men mount their horses.~~

~~DISSOLVE TO~~
~~Rides down the slope toward the rail road that marks the Bonasa street the other yellow~~ ¹¹⁵⁵

FIGURE 12

to have Pike declare his code, and in the lyrical finish suggested Pike's essential loneliness, the pain he constantly endures, and a nascent heroism. It's fair enough to say that Peckinpah transformed the scene; but he did so by building upon, not obliterating, what Green wrote.

The disposition of the groups of characters and the overall sequence of events in Green are very close to what they are in the

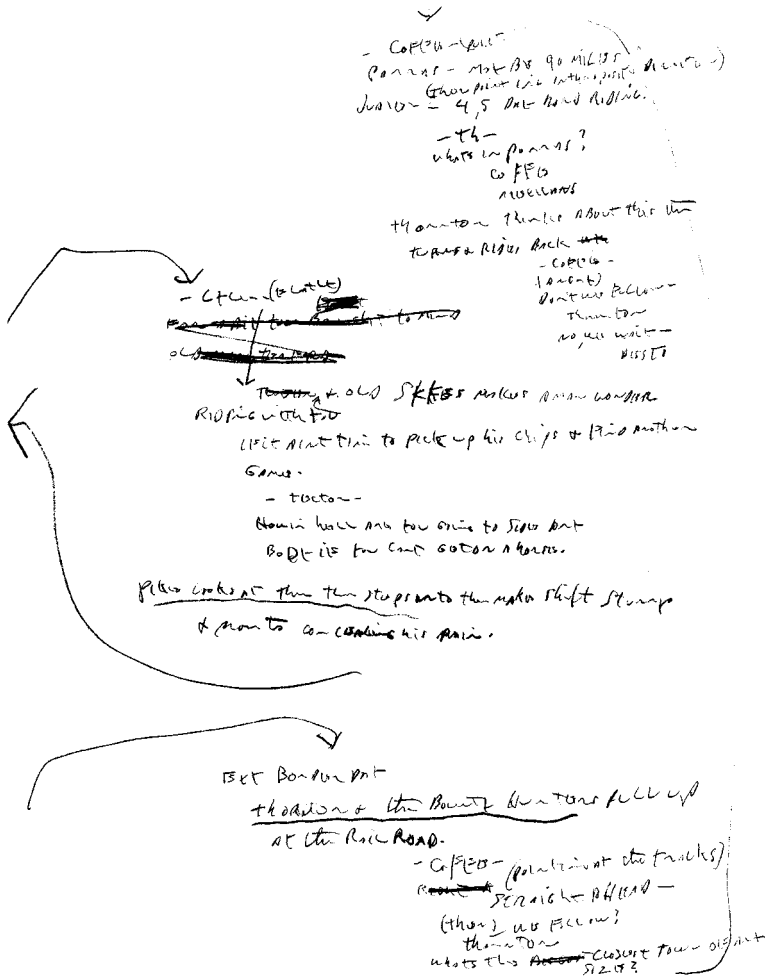


FIGURE 13

film. The most obvious differences in the first half are the character of Crazy Lee, whom Peckinpah created; the flashbacks, also Peckinpah's, which I'll treat later; and the scene in Angel's village.²¹ Green did not have the Bunch go to the village: Angel goes there alone and hears his father recount Mapache's raid in a long, nightmarish flashback that actually shows what happened; when Angel asks about his fiancée, Teresa, he is told that she left, willingly,

27.

114 THE MEN ARE SILENT FOR A LONG MOMENT, then they break into soft laughter which builds slowly.

LYLE

(after a moment)

He -- He was making plans while
me and Tector was --

He breaks up and can't continue.

DUTCH

(his laughter
growing)

While you was getting your bell
rope pulled by --

He ~~staggars up, laughing, goes down to one knee.~~ *(standing there almost staring with, looking)*

~~DUTCH~~

By two -- mind you, two -- Hondo
whores -- while Pike's dreaming
of washers -- you're matching two
of them -- in tandem --'

And the wild bunch falls apart in laughter -- even Pike is caught, but as he laughs, he knows that they are together again.

~~DISSOLVE TO~~

115 EXT. CAMP - NIGHT

PIKE AND DUTCH ARE SIDE BY SIDE in their blankets listening to Angel play the guitar. For several moments they are silent, then:

PIKE

Didn't you run some kind of mine --
in Sonora?

DUTCH

Yeah, I helped run a little copper --
nothing for us there except day wages.

116 PIKE FINDS IT IMPOSSIBLE to get comfortable. Groaning and wincing with pain he shifts on the bedroll.

PIKE

Why in the hell did you ever
quit?

CONTINUED

FIGURE 14

happily, with Mapache. Realizing that all this would have made for a scene of at least ten minutes' length that was missing all but one of the main characters and reduced that one to a passive auditor, Peckinpah dropped the flashback completely and had the Bunch accompany Angel to his village. He retained the betrayal by Teresa but made Mapache the murderer of Angel's father. The

[illegible]

FIGURE 15

survivor who tells about the raid became a new character, Don José, Angel's grandfather and the village elder.²²

Peckinpah had clear ideas about both the dramatic and thematic function of Angel's village. "The natural beauty of this location should contrast with other landscapes in the picture," he wrote. "This village and its inhabitants represent a complete and

green contrast to the arid world of the Wild Bunch" (Final, p. 45). He also wanted to establish a rapport between the Bunch and the villagers. He invented the bit about the Gorch brothers playing cat's cradle with Angel's sister and the dialogue among Pike, Old Sykes, and Don José, three aging bandits talking about love, life, and lost innocence ("We all dream of being a child again, even the worst of us. Perhaps the worst most of all"). Peckinpah also added the nighttime festivities that conclude with Pike's admonition to a drunken Angel thirsting for revenge, "Either you learn to live with it or we'll leave you here." The last and most important addition, the Bunch's exit from the village, Peckinpah improvised on the set; it was never in any version of the screenplay.

In the second half, the beginning of the train robbery through to the locomotive crashing into the boxcar is pretty much as in the original script. However, in *Green* the wagon carrying the stolen rifles has barrels lashed to its sides as flotation devices and is pulled across the river by cables. Peckinpah continually fussed with this sequence, making it more and more elaborate and complicated, all the way to the eve of principal photography, where he had *both* a cable crossing and a bridge explosion. Once down in Mexico, however, he simplified the action to much greater effect, dropping the business with the cables entirely and substituting the bridge crossing. He used the whole train sequence to heighten the contrast between the efficiency and teamwork of the Bunch vis-à-vis the inept bounty hunters and the inexperienced cavalry. These twin themes of competence and incompetence are present in *Green's* original, but the director heightened them and added new material and new scenes until they became a running counterpoint throughout the story. The additions, which also served to keep Thornton and his posse more alive throughout the film, include such scenes as the early exchange at the river where Thornton glares at his posse for laughing at a stupid joke; Coffey pretending to draw his pistol on a pensive, unsuspecting Thornton, who goes for his gun, only to be greeted by a burst of derisive laughter; Thornton's exasperated outburst to the posse following the train robbery ("What have I got? Nothing but you

egg-sucking, chicken-stealing gutter trash"); right to the very end when the bounty hunters, stupidly singing as they ride into hostile territory, are killed by Sykes and the Indians.²³ Peckinpah also added the quiet moment following the bridge explosion when Pike painfully hoists himself into his saddle on his bad leg and Tector offers him a drink, which contrasts with and resolves the Gorches' earlier ridicule when Pike fell to the ground.

Major Dundee revealed Peckinpah's interest in the clash between peasant cultures and European imperialism. In *The Wild Bunch* he highlighted the presence of the Germans wherever he could, adding the important reference to the First World War and involving them in the final battle, most significantly when their leader becomes Pike's first target after Mapache is killed. (He also brought back Mapache's automobile; in the original, Angel is dragged around by a mangy old burro.) Green wrote in the boy soldier who delivers the telegram to Mapache, which inspired Peckinpah to one of his proudest achievements in the film: the silent interplay that shows how the boy views Mapache as a hero, thus adumbrating the moment in the final battle when another boy soldier fires the first fatal bullet into Pike Bishop (which was Peckinpah's invention). The director then added the attack by Villa's forces as Mapache awaits the telegram. Those months he spent at Paramount researching *Villa Rides* really got his blood up on the whole subject of the Mexican Revolution, and he was not about to make a film set in that period without an appearance by Villa, which is necessary to clarify the urgency behind stealing the guns. An actual appearance by Villa's men also heightens our sense of how much danger the Bunch are in as they navigate the stolen weapons through bandit territory before the exchange with Mapache.

Green came up with the scene where Mapache's men try to take the guns without paying for them. But in Green's confrontation Pike merely threatens to light the fuse, which is how it remained throughout the revisions, save getting larger in scale (the original twenty soldiers became seventy or eighty). Not until the filming did Peckinpah push the situation to its logical, revelatory extreme

by having Pike actually *light* the fuse. The later scene of Mapache trying to operate the machine gun without a tripod is Green's invention. But the machine gun itself is absent from his climax, which takes place at night in a cantina and, though bloody, is small in scale. Nor does the machine gun figure much into Peckinpah's written revisions until the loose pages dated 20 May 1968, but even they do not suggest anything of the apocalyptic scale, the sheer bacchanalian intensity of the final battle as we know it from the film. By contrast, the opening ambush was written out in considerable detail, some bits dating back to Sickner's suggestions that Green put into his treatment and his script. Interestingly, none of the revisions contains the business that still shocks most audiences right from the outset: the children playing with the ants and the scorpions, the epic simile by which Peckinpah unified the entire film.²⁴

Not all of what Peckinpah put or left in the screenplay was necessarily meant to be used. Some things he shot just to cover himself. Three examples: Dutch's line that Angel "will have to show up with us when we deliver" (Final, p. 69); Sykes saying, "We've got to get him [Angel] out," Dutch asking, "How?" (109);²⁵ and an exchange between Pike and Mapache when the Bunch return to Agua Verde in which Pike tells Mapache about Thornton's posse and Mapache orders Herrera to take twenty men, find, and kill them (118). Dutch's line and his exchange with Sykes were both obviously cut because they telegraphed important turns in the plot, yet did not supply any vital information that wasn't adequately covered elsewhere (e.g., Dutch's "He played his string right out to the end" is all the explanation we need for why Angel goes along to deliver the last of the guns). Peckinpah's reasons for dropping the Pike–Mapache exchange are a little more complicated. He and Feldman argued about it just before the picture was locked, the producer wanting to keep it in. The main reason Peckinpah removed it, I would guess, is that it drops just one shoe in a place where there is no room to drop the other one. The quiet moment with the young prostitute when Pike makes the decision to reclaim Angel is the pivotal scene of the entire film. The last

thing Peckinpah would have wanted here is a distraction of any sort, especially an irrelevant plot point as to whether Herrera and his men will find Thornton and his posse. Moreover, if Peckinpah shot this scene the way he wrote it, then Herrera would have to leave with the cavalry, yet Herrera is also around a short while later for all the partying and is present in the final battle. Since Mapache ordered him to kill the posse, would he return without doing so? And if so, when? Plainly, the whole business was more trouble than it was worth. Narratively speaking, Peckinpah's solution – dropping the line and putting in a brief scene of Thornton warning his men that an army patrol is nearby – was the cleanest option. I also suspect that when Peckinpah saw the film whole, he didn't care for the way the exchange reflects upon Pike, whom he had already brought pretty low by this juncture. It is enough that after abandoning the wounded Sykes, Pike says he'll let Mapache take care of Thornton's posse; I don't think he wanted to show Pike actually *asking* the General to do so.

Peckinpah used to tell his editors, "Introduce, develop, finish."²⁶ *The Wild Bunch* illustrates this principle more than any other film he had ever made. For all its violence, he saw in it a story of reunion, renewal, and redemption. In Green, the bounty hunters kill Sykes in the ambush on the trail; when they arrive in Agua Verde at the end, they find the bodies of the Bunch piled up and the village already sacked. Thornton remarks to himself, "with admiration," "They were a wild bunch," the last line of the script. There is not the slightest hint of Peckinpah's magnificent extended coda, with its gradually shifting moods that modulate from devastation through grief to melancholy and laughter and finally to a kind of communal celebration: Thornton reclaiming Pike's pistol, the vultures circling overhead while the human vultures strip the bodies, the revolutionaries clearing the village of supplies, the off-screen deaths of the bounty hunters at the hands of Sykes and the Indians, the reunion of Thornton and Sykes in what some viewers have affectionately called a "neo-wild bunch," and the reprise of the exit from Angel's village.

A story about redemption is by definition a story about failure,

betrayal, and guilt. Accordingly, the two characters Peckinpah did the most work on are Pike Bishop and Deke Thornton. When *The Wild Bunch* was first released, it was a not uncommon observation that the members of the Bunch didn't have much individual characterization and were best thought of as a group. This was always a specious criticism, even in the studio-truncated version. The first major changes that Peckinpah made were to further deepen, humanize, and individuate not just the members of the Bunch, but Thornton, two of the bounty hunters (T.C. and Coffey), Harrigan, and Mapache and his men. The Gorch brothers remain perhaps closest to the original screenplay, but even with them Peckinpah added a great many things (the whole sequence in the wine cellar with the prostitutes, for example), including new dialogue, that made them more rounded as characters and, what was vital, that made them really *feel* like brothers.²⁷ They even bicker like men with a long family history:

LYLE: They made damn fools out of us, Mr. Bishop. It's getting so's a fellow can't sleep with both eyes closed for fear of getting his throat cut. Where in the hell were you [indicates Tector]?

TECTOR: Now you listen here, Lyle, you get up off your ass and help once in awhile and I wouldn't got caught near so easy.

Jim Silke, the director's close friend and sometime collaborator, says that from the beginning Peckinpah felt that all that was necessary to lift the decision to reclaim Angel from cliché was for the picture to answer the question "What kind of guys would really do that, sacrifice themselves like that?" (Weddle, 1994, p. 313). The key, he told Silke, lay in the characters' pasts, in particular the kind of man Pike was before the film proper begins, the things (especially the losses) that shaped him, and his relationship to his closest friend, Deke Thornton. Green's Pike is distinguished from the rest of the Bunch mostly insofar as he is their leader and is older than any of them except Sykes. On the first page of his revision, Peckinpah immediately described him as more "thoughtful," "a self-educated top gun with a penchant for violence who

is afraid of nothing – except the changes in himself and those around him”: “Make no mistake, Pike Bishop is not a hero – his values are not ours. . . . He lives outside and against society because he believes in that way of life.” If Peckinpah wanted to emphasize that Pike’s values are not ours, he nevertheless gave him a principle that any of us might readily identify with: When you side with a man, you stay with him. Pike is also much more haunted by an ethos of honor almost as a principle than, say, Dutch, for whom the word given and kept is entirely personal and conditional (the Gorch brothers are united by their family ties).

Peckinpah did a lot more with Pike’s physical infirmities, emphasizing that he is always in pain. It is a portrait of a tired, lonely man with a desire to make enough money to “back off” but who carries a lot of very unquiet ghosts inside that remind him of how often he has failed to live up to his own best image of himself. These reveal themselves in the three flashbacks that Peckinpah wrote in – Pike’s desertion of Thornton, his abandonment of Crazy Lee, and his failure to keep the woman he loved from being killed. Only the last is present in any form in Green:

PIKE: I met a woman once I wanted to marry. . . . She had a husband and I should have had sense enough to kill him. . . . One night I woke up and saw him watching me over a shotgun. He fired one barrel into her face. I was running for my gun on the other side of the room when he caught me down here. I wriggled around on that floor for more than an hour and he just sat on the bed and watched me. He never took his eyes off me and I’ve never stopped remembering him. He made his big mistake not reloading and giving me a second blast. (53)

Pike then tells how he was reduced to begging for a year in Waco before he recovered strength enough to move around, how he took five years to catch up with the man’s son, killing him after finding out that the man had gone to Cuba, and how there “hasn’t been a day or an hour that I haven’t thought about getting even with him.”

Peckinpah retained the business of the unfinished vengeance,

but how different the rest of it is from what he finally put on the screen! To start with, he mitigated, then eliminated entirely the gruesome physical details (the husband's shotgun becomes a handgun, the wife is no longer blasted in the face) and all the stuff about Pike's being a crippled beggar in Waco (the wound eventually transferred from his back to his leg). Next, he made it a true flashback that, unlike the other two flashbacks, depicts a clear disparity between the images and the commentary. In the original, Pike hardly seems to care about at all about Aurora (she isn't even given a name);²⁸ he talks mostly about getting even with the husband, the emphasis being on vengeance and violence. But in Peckinpah's revision, though the words Pike speaks to Dutch are about getting even, the images are about love and loss and suggest Pike's anguish, guilt, and shame. Peckinpah also added an introductory bit that shows Pike arriving two days late for a rendezvous without explanation or apology; and in one draft, he experimented with having the husband burst in on the couple after they've made love and had Aurora throw herself in front of Pike, taking the fatal shot for him. His reasons for deciding against this were apparently that he wanted it absolutely clear that Aurora's husband *means* to kill her and that the lovers' last moments together be of passion anticipated, not passion fulfilled.

About midway into preproduction, Lee Marvin, who was to play Pike, accepted a million-dollar offer to do *Paint Your Wagon* (1969) and bowed out of *The Wild Bunch*. Few clouds in Peckinpah's career ever had a silver lining, but this one did. He and Feldman immediately turned to other stars on their A list, which included Burt Lancaster, Charlton Heston, Gregory Peck, James Stewart, and William Holden. Peckinpah was a great admirer of *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957), and he had just recently watched *Stalag 17* (1953). Convinced that Holden was "tough enough" to play the part (Simmons, p. 84), Peckinpah seemed to realize that he had here an actor of considerably greater range and depth of feeling than Marvin, one who could take the character much further in the tormented, guilt-ridden direction he was already developing anyhow. The most immediate effects of the new casting were

two. Without losing any of the exterior toughness Peckinpah considered essential, Pike became both more sensitive and stronger. His toughness was now, artistically speaking, more valid because it no longer functioned as a mere given (in other words, a convention), but rather as part of the humanity of the character, the necessary shield he has developed against both the physical and emotional pain he must constantly endure.²⁹

As with Pike, so with Thornton: Peckinpah wanted the character to be contrasted with the group he is leading. In Green's opening ambush Thornton loses his head like the other bounty hunters and in the excitement kills some innocent townspeople. Unlike them, he admits to his mistake. Peckinpah kept this for a good while but eventually dropped it. The casting was probably an influence here too – Robert Ryan, with his brooding, troubled dignity, is not a man to lose control quite that way. But by then Peckinpah had already substantially reconceived both Thornton and his thematic function in the story. With his sense of form and structure – almost unerring in those days – and his obsession with paired characters who find themselves reluctant antagonists, he knew that a deepened characterization of Pike required its equivalent in the man who pursues him. Otherwise, both characters are cheapened, as are the conflict itself and the issues it focuses. In Ryan he found an actor whose screen presence would balance Holden's.

Peckinpah began by making Thornton far more integral to the plot. Thornton's relationship to Harrigan was made considerably more acrimonious, to the point of outright hatred, to which end Peckinpah made Harrigan an actual railroad executive.³⁰ In a curious missed opportunity, Green had Harrigan discover by accident, and only after the opening ambush, that Thornton and Pike used to ride together. Peckinpah made it the *reason* Harrigan gets him out of prison. There was a lot of talk in Peckinpah's early drafts about Thornton selling out, getting old, and changing, about his having been "broken." Along the way from revision to final cut the director eliminated all of this because it was too neat and easy, too formulaic. In a scene written just a few days before the

beginning of principal photography, Peckinpah came up with the flashback of Thornton's capture, showing how it was due essentially to Pike's carelessness. In the Collection it first appears in additional pages – marked "change," dated 21 March 1968 – that were interpolated into the 7 February 1968 (Final) shooting script. It was part of a larger scene of the Bunch on the trail that Peckinpah placed between the "decent burial" scene and the bunkhouse where Harrigan chews out the bounty hunters for letting the Bunch escape. The dialogue leading up to the flashback concludes with Pike remarking of Thornton, "He got old and tired, and when that happens, things change." Dutch replies, "He changed – you didn't." Then we see Thornton's capture and Pike's escape. When we return to the present, Lyle is talking about Butch Cassidy down in Argentina "making a killing." The scene ends with Pike hoping that Thornton "ain't on our tail – but don't bet on it" (20–21).

Peckinpah constantly layered his characters' relationships with motivations and emotions that are tangled, complex, and conflicted. Not only did he want us to understand that Pike feels guilty about Thornton's capture because his carelessness was largely responsible for it, but he also wrote in two flashbacks of Thornton in prison – one of him lashed to a post and being whipped, the other of him on a rock pile, both intended to be used as quick, almost subliminal dissolves – suggesting that Harrigan used his influence to have Thornton punished as a way of forcing him to join the posse.³¹ If Thornton was to be seen as "broken" – and it is by no means clear that Peckinpah felt this way by the time he finished the fine cut – then he would at least be revealed as a man who had faced hard choices and suffered cruel consequences that Pike, through guile, deceit, and desertion, had managed to escape. As always in Peckinpah, our judgments about his characters and what they do are made complicated and difficult because the basis of judgment itself is shown to be slippery and unsure, constantly shifting, often eroded entirely. "Things are always mixed" was his constant refrain.

Jim Silke told me that Peckinpah thought of Pike as the character who didn't change (because he couldn't) and Thornton as

the character who did change. But Silke was here recalling some very early conversations about the script when the director was just beginning to map out the background story of the Bishop–Thornton friendship. Peckinpah made many changes quickly and decisively, but this relationship, which he regarded as the key to the whole story, he took a long time working and reworking. He wrote the crucial flashback virtually on the eve of production; the two prison flashbacks were added less than a month earlier; and even by his extraordinary standards, he was unusually sensitive to the personalities his two stars would bring to bear on their roles. It is my view – comparing the material that was written and shot with what was retained and how it was shaped in the editing – that Peckinpah went so far beyond his initial formulation as virtually to have reversed it. Whether Pike was any longer incapable of changing or afraid of it is a matter of debate; but it is beyond question that by the time Peckinpah finished rewriting, the story picked up his outlaw leader when he *wants* a change. And by making Thornton Pike’s nemesis and thus his moral touchstone, the director surely encouraged us to see Thornton as more than a broken or, at least, a merely broken, man.³²

In the process, Thornton was transformed into something of an equivalent to what Philip Young described as the “code hero” in Hemingway: the man, usually a professional of some sort, who makes a basic compromise, but once he has done so, he abides by the rules and terms of his decision absolutely.³³ He represents, in short, the principle of honor – in Thornton’s case, the honor of keeping one’s word once it is given, which Peckinpah developed with great care throughout his revisions. In the original script, when Harrigan threatens Thornton with a return to prison if the Bunch are not caught, Thornton replies, “You make it pretty clear.” Peckinpah changed this to “I gave you my word,” thus sounding a theme that he will extend (“Damn that Deke Thornton to hell!” “What would you do? He gave his word”), ramify (Angel “played his string right out to the end”), and eventually resolve (“I sent them back, that’s all I said I’d do”). Introduce, develop, finish.

I have remarked how extensive Peckinpah's dialogue rewrite was and incidentally adduced examples of it. But it should be noted that most of the lines that everyone quotes are by the director: "It's not what you meant to do," "I'll hold 'em here until hell freezes over or you say different," "How'd you like to kiss my sister's black cat's ass?," "How does it feel to be so goddamned right?," "I wouldn't have it any other way," "When you side with a man," "We all dream of being a child again," "We don't *hang* nobody," "He played his string," "It ain't like it used to be, but it'll do." This last is a striking example of how Peckinpah never stopped working on something until it was as right as he could possibly make it. Throughout the script revisions this line read, "It ain't like it used to be, but it's better than nothing," which is how it was often quoted by critics who read the publicity synopsis but didn't bother to take another look at the film itself. The final change was not made until the scene was shot, and though seemingly small, it opens onto a world of difference between the lines: The one is nihilistic, the other affirmative with a purpose behind it.

IV

In a way, that difference reflects the pattern of Peckinpah's changes. By the time he finished his fine cut, Walon Green's hard, gritty screenplay about a band of ruthless, cynical outlaws would be transformed into a violent epic of great romantic sweep and deep personal feeling, built upon themes of betrayal, guilt, vengeance, and redemption. When Thornton joins up with Sykes's band of Indian revolutionaries and Peckinpah reprises the exit from Angel's village as the Bunch are serenaded by the peasants, death really does lead to transfiguration, realism gives way to romance, and our last image of these outlaws, in what is perhaps the single most self-reflexive moment of the film, is as heroes of an adventure that has already become the stuff of mythmaking and storytelling.

It is instructive that both the exit from Angel's village and its

reprise at the very end of the film were never in any version of the screenplay. The exit itself we know Peckinpah invented during shooting, while the idea of reprising it, which lifts the entire story to a whole new level of meaning, came to him only during the last weeks of the editing.³⁴ From this perspective it is obvious that the writing and rewriting represent only one stage in the creation of this film, and perhaps not the most important stage. The rest lies outside the scope of this essay because it consists in how Peckinpah worked with his actors; how he used his locations; how he set up, shot, and composed the scenes; how he improvised dialogue, scenes, even whole sequences on the spot; and finally, how he and his editors, Lou Lombardo and Robert Wolfe, put all the footage together in the cutting room. (At the time, the massiveness of his coverage was all but unprecedented.)

By way of conclusion, I'd like to describe three examples that illustrate how much "rewriting," as it were, Peckinpah left to the actual making of the film. "No matter how good a script is," he once said, "you have to adapt it to the needs of the actors."³⁵ It is almost impossible to overestimate his collaborations with his actors, how much exploration and discovery he encouraged in rehearsals and filming. We have seen how his reconception of Pike Bishop was influenced by William Holden. The casting of Ernest Borgnine likewise influenced Dutch, though in a very different way. Green's Dutch is a young man. Once Borgnine was signed, making him older and eliminating a few anomalous lines of dialogue are about all that Peckinpah did in the writing (apart, of course, from new dialogue when he added new scenes). Otherwise, on the page Dutch appears to change less from the original than any of the rest of the Bunch, even the Gorch brothers. But go to the film and observe how Peckinpah used Borgnine. Consider in particular how thoroughly *grounded* the film became through Borgnine's performance, and how ironic this was in many respects. Peckinpah agreed to Borgnine only reluctantly, as a concession to Hyman (who had used him in *The Dirty Dozen*), and one can understand his reservations: before *The Wild Bunch* (and even after) it is hard to recall really quiet, subtle work by this

actor. But he and the director became fast colleagues. Playing a blunt, forthright man, Borgnine was coaxed to give the most nuanced and inward-looking performance of his career. For Peckinpah, Dutch was the conscience of *The Wild Bunch*.³⁶ His simple strength, his direct, unadorned line readings, and the values of loyalty, solidarity, and comradeship that he embodies provide our first access to the Bunch as a group and keep us from losing contact with them throughout. Yet little of this is apparent from a mere reading of the script, except by hindsight.

Nor from the screenplay alone, even Peckinpah's considerably worked-over revisions, would we have any idea of how genuinely *funny* much of it would be in the playing. Critics were quick enough to recognize Peckinpah's black humor and his extraordinary gift for comic relief. But as Robert Becker has pointed out, "If you think beyond the violence and the tragic ending for a moment, you discover there's a lot of *party* energy in this movie."³⁷ This is not just in the way laughter rounds off so many scenes or in the bawdy carousing in Agua Verde; it goes right to the heart of the polarities that constitute the basic structural unit of the film itself: how violence, dissension, death, and both failure *and* success are repeatedly resolved in toasting, celebration, music, song, dance, and laughter, sometimes hale and hearty, as in the toast after the bridge is exploded, sometimes sinister and mocking, as in the grotesque hilarity of the *federales* after Angel is caught. The scene in Angel's village Peckinpah conceived as an actual party, with drinking, feasting, and music making, followed the next morning by one of his favorite formal devices, a procession: the peasants line up and sing to the departing Bunch.³⁸ This sequence, a kind of celebration, contains in embryo both the structure of the extended coda of the film and by implication the basic structure of the entire film. The differences between Thornton and Sykes are dissolved in laughter that, in turn, is cinematically dissolved into images of the Bunch at their most appealing, which are next dissolved into the exit from the village of the Bunch, who are then fixed in a final apotheosis as figures of legend. In these years Peckinpah's structural sense was supreme: the whole always

crystallized in the details, the details always mirroring the large design.

We know that the opening robbery was described in detail in the screenplay, but the closing battle was not. Why the difference? For one thing, though films are rarely shot in sequence, here the beginning of the story coincided with the beginning of the schedule, and Peckinpah knew that preparation was everything. But this only begs the question. The climax was scheduled later because he wasn't *ready* to shoot it. (Even if he had been ready, it is doubtful that he would have allowed it to be scheduled much earlier: it's never a good idea to film the end of the story at the beginning of production.) It wasn't until he was well into shooting that he fully discovered what the final battle was about and how he wanted to do it. My guess is that the impact of seeing the opening as Lombardo had first cut it together on location cannot be overemphasized here: once Peckinpah saw on film how horrifyingly violent yet spectacular a beginning he had, everything he knew about drama intellectually and intuitively told him that the closing battle would have to be not just longer or more intense and exciting, but something truly tremendous. And not in size and scope only, but in the very depiction of the violence itself: he would have to take it into waters literally uncharted by previous films with violent subjects, even the very good and great ones, like *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and *The Seven Samurai*. What form it would take he did not know, not quite yet, but he knew the immensity of the task that lay before him.

In the early eighties, he told a group of students at the University of Southern California that it wasn't until he saw the location – an old hacienda with a still-functioning aqueduct and bullet holes in the crumbling walls that were made in the revolution itself – that he realized his ideas for the final battle had been “all wrong.” Yet he still had no clear idea of how he would stage it right up to the day he directed the famous moment-of-silence standoff between the Bunch and the slain Mapache's army, another on-the-spot inspiration. Then he became absolutely stymied, one of the few times his legendary improvisational ability

deserted him. But once he figured it out and started back in shooting – the hiatus less than a day – everyone had to scramble to keep up. “Sam went way beyond what anybody expected he would do with that sequence,” his assistant Chalo Gonzalez recalls (Weddle, p. 343). Yet again we find none of it in the screenplays, not just because it wasn’t written but because it is something that *could not be written*: it could come into full being only in front of the cameras and in the editing room.

One of the continuing debates in film criticism ever since the auteur theory first burst into international prominence over three decades ago is the relative importance of writing vis-à-vis directing. I’m hardly about to resolve the matter here, except to suggest that if a director is not the first author of a film, then he or she is at the very least the *last* author of a film, and for that reason arguably the most decisive. This is because *everything* prior to the actual filming of the story, even the most polished screenplay ever written, is only so much material, not necessarily raw but certainly unborn, waiting to be brought to life in front of the camera. A film exists only in what is captured *on* film and how it is later cut together during the long months in the editing room.

“Persistence of vision,” science tells us, is the phenomenon that makes motion in motion pictures possible. But persistence of vision differently defined is also what makes the *art* of motion pictures possible. Though the Walon Green–Roy Sickner story, Green’s excellent screenplay especially, and Peckinpah’s revisions cannot be minimized, in the end it wasn’t the writing as such that made for a masterpiece. It was the vision Peckinpah first glimpsed when he imagined Pike riding over the sand dune and saw the Bunch’s long walk for Angel stretch out before him, the vision he held to, enlarging, sharpening, clarifying, never letting go until he had raised it to incandescence. His reward – and ours too – was a peerless achievement in the history of film and a great work of art.

NOTES

- 1 *Sam Peckinpah Collection*. Papers. Gift of the Peckinpah family. Inventory compiled by Valentin Almendarez, supervised by Samuel A. Gill,

archivist, April 1990. Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills, California.

- 2 Peckinpah composed his own original screenplays on yellow legal pads, and there is no reason to doubt he used them sometimes in rewriting *The Wild Bunch*. But the pages don't survive in his files, presumably because once the typist had transcribed them, they were thrown away.
- 3 This passage remained unaltered through the last complete draft, dated 7 February 1968 (with changes as late as 21 March). Unless otherwise noted, all script quotations are either from this draft, which is labeled "Final," or from Green's undated original. Identification and pagination hereafter will follow in parentheses. The passages just quoted are from Final, pp. 39, 120.
- 4 Unless otherwise noted, all quotations and background information come from interviews and conversations I had with Walon Green (1996–7), L. Q. Jones (1997), Don Levy (1978), Sam Peckinpah (1977–80), Jim Silke (1996), Garner Simmons (1997), and David Weddle (1997). Other principal sources include Stephen Farber, "Peckinpah's Return," interview with Sam Peckinpah (1969), rpt. in *Doing It Right: The Best Criticism on Sam Peckinpah's The Wild Bunch*, ed. Michael Bliss (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1994), pp. 37–45 (hereafter "Farber"); Garner Simmons, *Peckinpah: A Portrait in Montage* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), pp. 82–3, 99 (hereafter "Simmons"); David Weddle, *"If They Move . . . Kill 'Em!": The Life and Times of Sam Peckinpah* (New York: Grove Press, 1994), pp. 307–18 (hereafter "Weddle"); and memos and correspondence by Peckinpah, Phil Feldman, and Ken Hyman. All notes, memos, and letters cited in this essay are in the Peckinpah Collection. The epigraph is from Simmons, p. 86.
- 5 On 15 November 1971 Sickner was the victim of a stunt that went disastrously wrong on the television series *Cade's County*. The "gag," as stuntmen call it, required a Jeep to be jumped over a small ravine, but the Jeep didn't make it. The others, including the driver, jumped clear, but Sickner, inexplicably, held on; when the Jeep struck the far bank, it flipped over and sheared the top of his head off. He was left an invalid, with impaired speech and severely limited brain capacity. As of this writing, he is still alive but unable to provide any information.

In addition to the sources already cited, much of the information on Sickner's involvement in the project comes from interviews I had in April 1997 with Sickner's close friends Buck Holland and Jan Holland and with his son Kane Sickner. I am indebted as well to Lee Ann Fuller (Sickner's stepdaughter).
- 6 Hayward also went off to other projects – he was John Wayne's regular stunt double – which, as far as Sickner was concerned, ended any claims Hayward might have had, implied or otherwise, to the story.

- 7 In addition to sources already cited regarding Green's involvement, there is a long interview by Nat Segaloff, "Walon Green: Fate Will Get You," *Backstory* 3, ed. Patrick McGilligan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 135–6 (hereafter "Segaloff"). Unless otherwise noted, all remarks and attributions to Green are from my conversations with him.
- 8 For more on this, see Paul Seydor, *Peckinpah: The Western Films – A Reconsideration*, rev. ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980, 1997), pp. 182–3 (hereafter "Seydor"). In the fine cut all references to the Pinkertons and Butch Cassidy were excised, because by then *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* was a competing picture at 20th Century Fox scheduled to come out within three months of *The Wild Bunch*.
- 9 With full use of Paramount's research facilities, Peckinpah spent the first part of 1967 poring over all the books, photographs, and newsreels of the Mexican evolution the staff could locate. Both he and his cinematographer, Lucien Ballard, declared on several occasions (see, e.g., Farber, pp. 44–5) that the overall look of *The Wild Bunch* was substantially influenced by the newsreel footage. I'd be amazed if *Memoirs de Un Mexicano*, or some of the material used in it, were not among the films Peckinpah watched that winter.
- 10 "The violence in slow motion is very expressly in the script," Green once said (Segaloff, p. 143), but he later corrected himself. Not only are there no explicit directions for slow motion in his screenplay, there isn't even a suggestion to that effect (which is also true, by the way, of Peckinpah's several drafts). Obviously, however, slow motion was on Green's mind and he did discuss it with Sickner, who must have known that Peckinpah had run high-speed cameras on *Dundee*. Even before then, Peckinpah had used slow motion once on television in *The Losers* (1962) and would use it, again on television, in *That Lady Is My Wife* (1966). Neither was particularly influenced by Kurosawa, nor, for that matter, was the slow motion in *The Wild Bunch*. The synthesis of fast cutting and multiple-speed imagery that Peckinpah forged in 1968–9, while not without its antecedents (see Seydor, pp. 353–4), was as authentic a stylistic innovation as any in films.
- 11 Green created better than perhaps he knew with the names. "Pike," for example, also means lance or spear, and it is sometimes used as a verb meaning to thrust or pierce; both are appropriate for an embattled old bandit. An archaic meaning is "peak," which is likewise appropriate for a man described as "the best" at what he does and who is eventually given a mythic apotheosis. Thornton, I always assumed, derived from the first syllable, as he is literally the thorn in Pike's side. The similarity of Harrigan to E. H. Harriman, the actual railroad ex-

ecutive whose trains Butch Cassidy robbed, is purely coincidental, Green says; but it was certainly a happy coincidence, as is its similarity to "harry," meaning to harass again and again, exactly Harrigan's relationship to Thornton. As I've observed elsewhere, issues of intention notwithstanding, little in *The Wild Bunch* functions merely by accident or without design.

- 12 Green has conflicting recollections of when he actually wrote *The Wild Bunch*. He told Segaloff (p. 140) that he did it while on *Morituri*. This is impossible because Carell hired him only after he had proved that he could write by doing the polish on *Winter à Go-Go*, which went into production after *Morituri*. Green first told me that he wrote *The Wild Bunch* in Brazil in November and December 1966. First, I pointed out to him that there seemed to be several inconsistencies about this date too. First, in December 1966 Sickner was already trying to set up a deal for Peckinpah to rewrite and direct the film, for which a dated letter of agreement (that I'll discuss further on) exists. How could Sickner be making a deal for Peckinpah to rewrite a script that hadn't been finished yet? Second, four months later, Peckinpah was starting his rewrite. This doesn't leave a lot of time for Carell to have done the budget break down and passed and for Sickner to have peddled it elsewhere while Green lost interest and returned to documentaries. After thinking about it a little longer and checking on some things, Green got back to me: "You know, it was raining a lot while I was writing that screenplay, and when I first told you November and December of 1966, I was thinking about when *our* rain starts, which is often in December. But *Brazil's* winter rains are during our spring months, and that was when I finished *The Wild Bunch*, in Brazil in the *spring* of 1966."
- 13 Sam Peckinpah to P.S., letter, 8 April 1977.
- 14 Speaking of clouded histories, it is not beside the point to note that in these years both Peckinpah and Sickner were part of a loosely connected group of actors and stuntmen (whose number included Lee Marvin, Jason Robards, and many of the supporting casts and crews on Peckinpah's films) who were hard daily drinkers. What with the alcohol, his worries about whether he'd ever make another movie again, and the numerous scripts he was trying to sell as leverage for directing, Peckinpah's memories of this period cannot be absolutely trusted, nor can anyone else's, in particular those of Sickner and Marvin, who drank, if anything, much more than Peckinpah. (In these years the director could at least claim dry periods when he worked.) Interestingly, however, the account from Peckinpah's letter to me, though brief, is, from the standpoint of surviving documents, the

most accurate recollection of anyone's involvement with the project I've come across so far.

According to Buck Holland, not long after arriving in Mexico to begin working on *The Wild Bunch*, Sickner raised so much hell drinking, brawling, and carousing that the Mexican authorities bodily escorted him out of the country and barred him from returning (he tried every entry point he knew and was blocked at each one). The remainder of his involvement with the production was stateside. His "associate producer" credit was part of his deal when Warners purchased the screenplay, but in no serious sense was he a producer on this film (which was the effective beginning and end of any career he might have hoped for in this capacity).

- 15 Peckinpah himself said on several occasions that the film he really wanted to direct upon returning to features was *The Ballad of Cable Hogue* (1970), which Warren Oates had brought to him. Garner Simmons and I both have doubts about this. While Peckinpah's enthusiasm for the screenplay is evidenced by how quickly he and Feldman managed to get it into production immediately following *The Wild Bunch* (very few directors in his position would have staked such newly gained power on so personal and so uncommercial a project), I've found nothing to indicate that it was even near a front burner at this time in his career. Nor was there studio interest, and the director himself was working on such diverse scripts as *The Hi Lo Country*, *Castaway*, *Caravans*, *Villa Rides*, *The Diamond Story*, and *The Wild Bunch*, among others, to say nothing of the television projects (see Weddle, pp. 265–306, and Seydor, pp. 170–3).
- 16 According to correspondence in the Collection, Ryerson might have given Sickner the money as early as February, but it doesn't seem to have found its way to Peckinpah until early spring or later.
- 17 Just how strapped is evidenced by his selling his share of *The Rifleman*, a television series he helped create, for \$10,000, a fraction of its worth at the time (and a tiny fraction of its eventual worth once the syndication and cable markets took off twenty years later).
- 18 Script credit on screen goes to Green and Peckinpah, in that order. The Guild initially objected to Peckinpah's receiving a credit, but Green felt it was deserved and wrote eloquently on the director's behalf (see Simmons, p. 105).
- 19 Sam Peckinpah to Ken Hyman, note, 27 October 1967.
- 20 I have not bothered to do a line count, but my guess is that Peckinpah changed or added almost as much dialogue as he kept.
- 21 This account glosses over how fully Peckinpah fleshed out Green's opening: All the biblical references are his; so are the mayor's speech about the evils of drink, the hymn "Shall We Gather at the River?,"

- many specific bits such as the woman with the package who bumps into Pike, Dutch at full gallop leaning down from his horse to swoop up the saddle bags, and children everywhere, not to mention the whole choreography of the sequence (to which the assistant director, Cliff Coleman, and Roy Sickner himself no doubt made contributions).
- 22 Peckinpah had Don Jose confess that he ran and hid, "like a coward," during the raid. This confession was included in early cuts but was eventually deleted. The reasons are not known, but an educated guess is that it didn't go anywhere either as plot or as characterization. Another deleted scene has to do with a long bit of comic relief, which Peckinpah wrote, involving Dutch and some villagers trying to shoe an uncooperative mule. Memos between the director and Feldman indicate that this was removed owing to technical problems in the lab timing and because it didn't work very well (the producer was not alone in hating it). If Don José's dialogue had been intercut with this sequence, it may have been impossible to salvage it from the sequence itself – which explains Dutch's curious absence from the scene and perhaps accounts for what has always struck me as the odd editing scheme of the exchange between Pike and Don José, where so much of their dialogue is played off screen.
- 23 One of the best examples of the bounty hunters' ineptitude comes near the end of the picture, when one of them falls off a galloping horse. However, this was a real, not a planned, fall, which the other stuntmen didn't let the poor man live down for the rest of the production.
- 24 Peckinpah got the idea for this when Emilio Fernandez, the actor who plays Mapache, told him, "You know, the Wild Bunch, when they go into that town like that, are like when I was a child and we would take a scorpion and drop it on an anthill" (Simmons, p. 86).
- 25 This exchange is in the theatrical trailer, which is included in the Warner Home Video laserdisc of the 1995 restoration of *The Wild Bunch*.
- 26 Richard Gentner to P.S., 1996.
- 27 One big change that Peckinpah made was to reduce drastically the Gorches' bigotry toward Angel and other Mexicans, particularly the racial epithets ("greaser," "bean"); from Pike he removed all traces of it. Memos indicate that Feldman was worried that the Mexican censors would not grant permission to film there unless this material was removed or softened. In the absence of memos by Peckinpah responding to this point, there is no way of knowing if this was a serious concern of his. My guess is that he knew that a little of this attitude goes a long way and revised accordingly.
- 28 We don't know her name from the film either, as no one speaks it (just as we don't know that Don José is Angel's grandfather). Yet it

was typical of Peckinpah throughout his career to give even bit players and walk-ons a name. According to his friend Don Levy, Peckinpah did this because he never forgot the days when he was struggling to make it. He believed it made an actor feel better about himself if he could say, "I'm playing Joe the deputy in a new movie," as opposed to, "I got a bit as a deputy." Of course, Peckinpah also knew that giving a character a name puts the actor in a more personal relationship to the role, which usually pays off with a better performance.

- 29 Significantly, the Aurora scene did not assume its final form until *after* Holden was cast. It is easy to imagine Lee Marvin thirsting for vengeance, but who can imagine him pining for a lost woman, as his miscasting in John Frankenheimer's *The Iceman Cometh* (1973) demonstrates? To be sure, Peckinpah directed Marvin in a 1961 episode of *Route 66* in which he played a cuckolded man with a sensitivity and a subtlety rarely seen in his film work. But Holden is so completely Pike Bishop that no one I've talked with who had anything to do with the project when Marvin was still attached to it regrets Marvin's departure. (Peckinpah identified with Holden and put quite a lot of himself into Pike; see Weddle, pp. 334–8, and Seydor, pp. 170–3, 180–1.)
- 30 Probably thinking of Martin Ransohoff (who fired him from *The Cincinnati Kid*) or Jerry Bresler (his producer on *Major Dundee*) or any number of studio "suits," Peckinpah described Harrigan as "a small, dapper, self-important back-shooting railroad executive" (Final, p. 5).
- 31 They first appear in the Final script (6) as changes dated 27 February. As with the flashback to Thornton's capture, they were placed differently, and far less effectively, there (on the rooftop before the shooting starts) than in the completed film (where the lashing is dissolved in under Thornton's close-up as the last beat in his bickering with Harrigan before hitting the trail; the rock pile never made the final cut).
- 32 For more on this point, see Seydor, pp. 168–70.
- 33 Philip Young, *Ernest Hemingway: A Reconsideration*, rev. ed. (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1966), pp. 63–74.
- 34 David Weddle tells me that the editor, Lou Lombardo, said that this was a suggestion of his.
- 35 "Playboy Interview: Sam Peckinpah," *Playboy* 19, no. 8 (August 1972), 72.
- 36 See "Sam Peckinpah Lets It All Hang Out," interview, *Take One* 2, no. 3 (January–February 1969), 19.
- 37 Robert Becker to P.S. (1996).
- 38 Peckinpah *really* loved a parade, and an amazing number of them or their equivalents appear in his work.

2 **Peckinpah the Radical: The Politics of *The Wild Bunch***

It is unthinkable that the 1995 rerelease of *The Wild Bunch* (1969) almost didn't happen due to a controversy within the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) about the need for the film to carry an NC-17 rating.¹ Considering the amount of violence in the 1990s cinema, particularly in the work of such self-consciously indebted heirs to Sam Peckinpah as John Woo and Quentin Tarantino, suppressing *The Wild Bunch* would have been one of the more dismal ironies of the age. The irony would have been all the more profound considering the relative depthlessness of these newer directors and much of the male-oriented action cinema that trades so heavily in violence. Looking at Peckinpah's work today, one cannot help but perceive the massive social and cultural break that has occurred within the past twenty years; indeed, one could argue that the period and the cultural tendency called "postmodernity" is something post-*Wild Bunch*. Peckinpah, so often referred to as the "master of violence," or similar malarkey, was among the last social critics produced by Hollywood. His use of violence, like all thematics of his work, is deeply involved with profound humanist and antiauthoritarian concerns that sometimes verge on radicalism. Peckinpah's great compassion for the human condition and for the characters he created is

something totally alien to the glacial movie-brat worldview of a Tarantino that showcases obsessively various favorite tropes and images of commercial cinema and consumer culture. Even more upsetting, the very hagiography provided Peckinpah by fans such as Tarantino, Woo, Walter Hill (who restaged the opening and closing massacres of *The Wild Bunch* in *The Long Riders* [1980] and *Extreme Prejudice* [1987], respectively), and a host of others tends to entrench Peckinpah in a very specific and limited position in the American cinema, and to perpetuate blinkered or mistaken notions about the politics of his vision.

Sam Peckinpah's death in 1984 produced a few retrospectives, but his eulogists tended to describe a director of some promise who failed to attain the stature of a major hero in the industry pantheon. It is not important that *Cross of Iron* (1977), *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia* (1974), and *The Killer Elite* (1975) are complex on issues of sexuality, patriarchy, and capitalism; it is sufficient to know that Peckinpah simply ran out of steam, no longer able to attract an audience, a filmmaker whose breakthrough *The Wild Bunch* gave him temporary celebrity in the media spotlight as Hollywood's master of graphic violence.

The inadequate reappraisal of Peckinpah is representative of the misguided strategies of journalistic criticism. Rather than focus on the innovative themes of his work, the inflections of several genres, and the evidence of progressive ideas emerging from the restrictions of industry, critics regard Peckinpah chiefly as a one-shot artist whose contradictions and incoherent body of work diminish him as a subject for serious consideration. But Peckinpah's contradictions, as much as those of any Hollywood director, are at the heart of what makes his films important. That he should be able to produce a work of some ideological coherence in his masterpiece, *The Wild Bunch* (1969), is fairly extraordinary given the resistance of his day. At this point, I do not wish to feign some deconstructionist conceit about "Peckinpah" being a slate, an intertext where a number of narratives and genre conventions meet. Peckinpah's individual contribution can be appreciated precisely as it is viewed within a historical context, and as the pro-

gressive impulses of this director are seen simultaneously with their contradictions and their overall relationship to the industry. Many of Peckinpah's films of the 1970s contained progressive, even radical themes (and almost always showed great technical mastery), but for various reasons, such as the tendency of media reviewers to dismiss Peckinpah for his several repetitive themes, the progressiveness of his work was largely unperceived. Yet there is a great deal about Peckinpah's work, including its late phase, that is interesting and will undoubtedly get fuller treatment.

Andrew Britton wrote an important piece about the gay subtext of *Cross of Iron*,² a film that could stand closer examination, with attention to Peckinpah's interest in Brecht. The interconnections of government, business, media, and the military-intelligence apparatus, favorite concerns of horror/science fiction in the 1970s and 1980s, keep recurring in Peckinpah. *The Getaway* (1972), an interesting attempt (damaged by the casting of Ali MacGraw) at the type of crime thriller made popular by Raoul Walsh, is a Vietnam/Watergate-era film in its sense of pervasive corruption (the penal system actually controlled by the private sector, both men and women portrayed as prostitutes exchanging favors for personal freedom). *The Killer Elite* says much in its title: the intelligence community is portrayed as a glorified, transnational Murder Inc. employing psychopaths usually associated with the underworld in earlier films. This film and *The Osterman Weekend* (1983) (Peckinpah's last and strongest attack on American society in its ornate conspiratorial vision) are noteworthy in their post-Watergate depiction of betrayal, avarice, internecine rivalry, and the demise of any sense of law and democratic principles. One image in *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia* poetically sums up these concerns: a gangster/executive gets a pedicure from his secretary while he reads a *Time* article about Nixon's possible impeachment. The apocalyptic gun battles that conclude many of Peckinpah's films (and that immediately put off critics) may be seen as the same expression of rage against the current society represented in the *fantastique* by exploding bodies, reversion to barbarism, or technological Armageddon. *The Wild Bunch* is simply our best model,

and one especially useful in that for all its celebrity as a classic Western (and even a landmark film in relation to others by Peckinpah), its radical content has been ignored.

To be sure, prejudices against Peckinpah are not easily overcome, at least in part because of his public profile and intellectual obsessions. A hard-drinking, crusty director in the tradition of Ford and Hawks, Peckinpah championed the "territorial imperative" and similar determinist theories of Robert Ardrey. Embracing such reactionary drivel seemed to supply Peckinpah with a "scientific" rationale not for machismo but for an incipient nihilism. These interests were catered to in the extreme in the pedantic and often repugnant film essay *Straw Dogs* (1971), whose hyperbolic violence was hardly mitigated or rationalized by the flagrant misogyny in its man's-home-is-his-castle thesis centered on an academic weakling transformed into defender of the hearth. Peckinpah's interest in Hemingway and Ford, individualism, and the solidarity of the male group also did not bode well for any sense of Peckinpah as radical artist. The very interesting writing of Jim Kitses³ and Paul Seydor⁴ helped ensure Peckinpah critical respectability, but as late as 1981 a major text on film history contained an entry on *The Wild Bunch* titled simply "Zapping the Cong,"⁵ regarding the film chiefly as an allegory of the Vietnam incursion, certainly pertinent but only a component of the film's more general ideological investigation.

While the directorial innovations of *The Wild Bunch* have been noted in full, it was not until around the time of Robin Wood's remark that the film is part of the "apocalyptic phase"⁶ of American filmmaking that we see a different disposition toward the politics of this film and a tendency to see it in terms other than a vague parable about American intervention in Vietnam. When one looks at the restored version of *The Wild Bunch*, it is difficult not to appreciate what an extraordinarily adversarial work it is, savaging the Western genre and the American civilizing experience it has mediated. Brecht and Buñuel (much admired by Peckinpah – Buñuel's *Los Olvidados* [1951] was a favorite film) shine through more vividly than Hemingway and Ford, and it was perhaps Peckinpah's downfall that such an amalgamation should present itself unresolved.

Appreciation of the richness of *The Wild Bunch* has been delayed for some very specific and material reasons. First, the marketing of the film by Warner Bros. was callously indifferent, beginning with the studio's cutting of the flashbacks concerning Pike's early life (scenes Peckinpah felt were central to the film) and its double-billing of the film with ostensibly similar adventure fare produced by Warners such as *The Green Berets* (1968) and, later, *Dirty Harry* (1971). Second, the film was coopted in several respects by the hyped *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, a star vehicle for Paul Newman and Robert Redford, which contained (but treated with a light touch) the theme of men with their backs to the wall, an idea often spoofed and trivialized that would saturate the Western as the genre played itself out in the 1960s. Perhaps most important, *The Wild Bunch* could not hold its own against films embraced by the counterculture and recognized as more or less embodying progressive sentiments, such as *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), *Zabriskie Point* (1970), and *Easy Rider* (1969). It did not seem immediately apparent to audiences of the late 1960s' counterculture that *The Wild Bunch* was a film firmly situated in the crises of that decade, and concerned with making some sweeping statements about America and the civilizing process that produced the Vietnam adventure. The unusually graphic (at that date) violence of Peckinpah's film, the presence of such Hollywood mainstays as William Holden, and the very fact that it was a Western excluded it at first both from commercial success (its road show presentation never happened, and it was rereleased twice before it achieved an audience) and from appraisal as ideologically provocative. Even a cursory review, informed by the critical practice of recent years, reveals how extraordinarily bold are the gestures of *The Wild Bunch*.

PECKINPAH PERSONAL AND POLITICAL

In his comments on the film in his book *Horizons West*, Jim Kitses remarks, "*The Wild Bunch* is America."⁷ The implications of this statement become clear as we understand how interwoven the film's critique of the frontier experience is with its

insights into the construction of male personality by American culture. The film begins this examination by the critical approach it takes to the general theme of U.S. adventurism in Mexico, a theme popular in the postwar Western as American interventionism escalated internationally. Films such as *Vera Cruz* (1953) or, later, *The Magnificent Seven* (1960) and *The Professionals* (1966) depicted Mexico as an idyllic landscape or arid backdrop to test the mettle of alienated men in disfavor in their own land (an early scene of *The Searchers* [1956] contains this idea, with Ethan Edwards giving his niece a Mexican military decoration). Except for those films that use the Mexican Revolution for a meditation on revolutionary change (*Viva Zapata*, 1952) or for broader statements about warfare and the male group (*They Came to Cordura*, 1959), the attitude of the postwar Western toward Mexico recapitulates notions of the Other from American melodrama. The Mexican, like the Indian, is alternately demonized and romanticized, with death being the “right place to go” (an important reference point for all this is the nineteenth-century play *Metamora*). The landscape of Mexico is an Other as it becomes the inverse of a Conradian jungle: it is a hellish desert where machismo is proven through confrontations with crazed natives (John Wayne’s *The Alamo* [1960] is archetypal). In *The Wild Bunch*, the historical specificity of revolutionary Mexico is understood precisely within the context of assumptions about imperialism, seen first in the construction of the male subject, and as a conjunction of Self and Other as the plight of Mexico is related to the self-image of the United States, and the personalities of Peckinpah’s Hispanics have correlates in his Anglos.

It has been suggested by various critics that *The Wild Bunch* is finally about Angel/Jaime Sanchez, the young idealist whose utopian dreams and revolutionary fervor are reclaimed when the Bunch make their last stand at Aqua Verde. Pike/William Holden sees in Angel his lost youth and a moral code the Bunch have long since scrapped. But this popular interpretation overlooks the film’s sense that if such a code ever existed, it was morally bankrupt at its inception. Angel is a revolutionary, but he is also a belligerent

**FIGURE 16**

Angel's capture and torture reawaken Pike's lost sense of honor and community.

misogynist; by relating him to the young Pike, we see the doomed nature of Angel's dream. Calling Angel a misogynist does not lend any distinctiveness to Angel's sins since it is clear that Angel's conduct and that of Pike are merely representative of the world of the film. In most respects, Angel, Pike, and in fact most of the characters stand for the norm. Peckinpah's principal concern is to point to some standard assumptions shared by men. Angel's romantic love for Teresa gives him the prerogative to murder her; the youthful Pike causes Aurora's death out of a bravado and arrogance that mask his insecurity. *The Wild Bunch's* parable of America is concerned with the conflict between the romantic and the real, the ideal and the material, a conflict represented in Pike's agony over the public self (the resourceful outlaw) he sustains versus the insecure, blundering, and vicious man he wants to conceal or rationalize through references to codes of honor.

Angel's relationship to Pike is significant since Angel's capture and persecution reawaken Pike's anguish over lost family and community, a sense of life as it might have been. Yet, although this

vision is clearly preferable to the hell represented by Harrigan and Mapache (technocracy, militarism, imperialism), it is not unrelated to the evils of the world. Pike has consistently lived a lie, one that Angel buys into given his unquestioning allegiance to Pike ("I go with you, *jefe*"). His admiration of Pike (the charismatic male who remains undistorted in the eyes of the young) precludes Angel's stated beliefs in democracy and community, in the solidarity he supports to the point of sacrificing his life. It is sensible that Peckinpah should show Mapache standing amid the gunfire during Pancho Villa's assault on the *federales*; Mapache's bravery is reducible here to an absurdly inflated self-image, machismo rampant and ridiculous. Mapache is separated only a little from Pike and Angel by his authoritarianism, but Peckinpah indeed makes the line deliberately thin. Mapache is also chivalrous, romantic, hot-headed, brutal, and blundering, the same amalgam we see in Pike and Angel. (Young children are shown admiring Mapache, much as Angel and the children of his village admire Pike; Mapache's remarks to the children at the battle with Pancho Villa and at Aqua Verde are as banal and deluded as Pike's admonitions to Angel.) The lie of the male code informing Pike/Angel and Mapache is revealed in the relationship between Pike and Thornton/Robert Ryan. We can understand their story only in the unedited version of the film, but this two-character construct, basic to Peckinpah's earlier *Ride the High Country* (1961), is absolutely essential to the narrative.

In the first flashback, showing Pike's escape from a brothel and his consequent betrayal of Thornton, the film suggests that the two men are caretakers of shared memories not easily borne. The flashback occurs just after Pike has bragged to Dutch about his willingness to meet the railroad company and Pershing's army head on ("I wouldn't have it any other way"). Pike is plagued by the memory of the bordello episode ("Being sure is my business"), giving the lie as it does to Pike's entire life. When the Bunch ride out later in the film to rob the train for Mapache, Pike tells Dutch, "This time we do it right." This line is important since it occurs just after Pike recounts the story of Aurora's murder and the origin of

his wounded leg (as Kitses pointed out, Pike's bad leg makes us recognize him as a "crippled man burdened by his past"; there is another metaphor here since Pike is an archetypal limping hero who prevails, rather pathetically, over a barren land). Pike has never been "sure" about anything and is not able to "do it right" even when the act is his last chance at personal affirmation. When the bounty hunters find the dead Bunch at Aqua Verde, Coffey breathlessly says: "There he *is*, there's *Pike!*," to which T.C. responds: "You ain't so damn big now, are you, Mr. Pike?" Thornton is out of earshot, but the point is clear: no one will ever really know the dignity and profound failure of the outlaw, and perpetuating his legend is not a concern of his lost friend. The bordello flashback, shared by Pike and Thornton, is key to understanding the film's conception of the hypocrisy the male lives out. Thornton, sent to prison by his friend's incompetence, continues in his affection for and loyalty to Pike. When Coffey asks Thornton about Pike, wondering "what kind of man we're up against," Thornton responds flatly, "The best. *He* never got caught." Thornton never betrays his old friend, never revealing the real reason Pike wasn't caught. The implication here concerns not just Thornton's affection for Pike, but his need to support Pike's code, on which rests Thornton's own identity and self-worth, even if his reduction to bounty hunter forced to pursue his old comrades works principally to shake Thornton loose from the romanticism to which Pike desperately clings. While Pike practically cringes from the bordello memory (he rebounds from the moment of guilt by telling Dutch, "I made him [Harrigan] change his ways"), Thornton bears it stoically (in Peckinpah's deft cross-cutting), having reconciled for himself the truth about men. The sexual politics are manifest here, since it is clear that the affection men have for each other is consistently translated into violence and bravura acts resulting in destruction, including self-destruction born of denial of a basic reality.

There is no irony in Thornton's most intimate connection with Pike occurring when Pike is dead (Thornton's retrieval of Pike's revolver) as the male code, really the repressed homoerotic code, finally merges eros with thanatos. And Dutch's whittling on a stick

outside the bordello as he mourns Angel's fate is indeed concerned with Dutch's affection for Angel about to culminate in a personal apocalypse that connects the libido to the death wish in an essential prescription of the cult of the male group.

Dutch is especially central to the sexual politics of the film and the Bunch's relationship to the world at large; he appears at some significant transitions that underscore the contradictions of *The Wild Bunch*. There is a particularly telling moment in the dissolve that concludes the Bunch's poetic farewell to Angel's village, serenaded by peasants in a moment that seems to pay homage to the pastoral utopianism of the Western. The dissolve fades into a close shot of a woman breast-feeding a baby; across her bosom rests a bandolier of ammunition. The brutal image turns the scene immediately preceding it into myth. We are now in Mapache's stronghold, the real world. Dutch and Angel scout Aqua Verde for bounty hunters; their relationship equals Dutch's camaraderie with Pike. The shot of Dutch and Angel just after the breast/bandolier image underscores the close construction of eros and thanatos, the unbridled id as the consequence of repression so central to the film. Dutch is a support and confidant, challenging Pike on hoary notions such as the sanctity of a man's word ("It's who you give it to!"). Yet in many scenes the notion of Dutch as caretaker of the Bunch's moral conscience is thoroughly undercut. Dutch is also another rather blind disciple who mirrors the hero's darker aspects, a kind of negative Sancho Panza. He supports Pike's decision to leave the dead Buck unburied, scoffing at the thick-headed and sadistic Gorch brothers, who sometimes actually display greater humanity ("He was a good man, and I think we oughta bury him!"). Dutch, after being querulous during his campfire talk with Pike, finally supports Pike's machismo ("Pike, I wouldn't have it any other way either"). At the final massacre, Dutch uses a woman as a shield, presaging Pike's murder of a prostitute who wounds him ("Bitch!"). But there is something more ornate to Dutch's character.

Some critics observe half-seriously that Dutch appears to be gay since he doesn't enter the brothel in the scene just before the Bat-



FIGURE 17

Dutch and Pike share a last moment of friendship before their death in the Aqua Verde battle.

tle of Bloody Porch. The obvious response is that Dutch is indeed the most principled and troubled member of the gang. He recalls Angel's rescue of him during the train robbery and his abandoning Angel to Mapache – reality versus the male code is thrown in the face even of the Bunch's soul and arbitrator (Dutch suggested to Pike that Angel be allowed to keep some of the stolen guns). Yet Dutch's sexuality is hardly an outlandish topic for discussion. Considering the intimacy of so many men in the film (Angel–Dutch, Pike–Dutch, Pike–Angel, Pike–Thornton), the film's violence seems manifestly an explosion of the tension and repression under these deeply felt, unspoken, and complicated relationships. Except for a brief dance at Angel's village, Dutch has no heterosexual relationships, not even any horsing around with whores at Mapache's bath house. Even Old Sykes affirms, "I'm a delight

with a pretty girl!" Dutch shares intimate moments only with Pike and Angel, the real/romantic axis of the film. He sleeps beside Pike as the two men share doubts with each other. Pike needles Dutch in the good-natured way that suggests a strong emotional bond ("Come on, ya lazy bastard!"). During the final massacre, the two men have some very significant scenes. At a small lull before the final phase of the bloodletting, Dutch and Pike crouch behind an upturned table, sharing a knowing and frightened stare, realizing the end they have created. Dutch cheers at the devastation Pike wreaks with the machine gun ("Give 'em hell, Pike!"), the younger man again applauding the prowess of the older, and is consequently horrified as Pike goes down. Dutch throws himself in the line of fire as he reaches for Pike; the two men collapse looking at each other, Dutch saying Pike's name several times.

Far from being simply a recognition of the Bunch's futility, the film's final moment is an affirmation of men's affection for each other, even as it is displayed in the highly repressed, twisted forms sanctioned by dominant culture (well represented in the Western, the most conservative film genre). *The Wild Bunch* comes very close to suggesting something about the male group that William Burroughs insists on in *The Wild Boys*, *Cities of the Red Night*, and *The Place of Dead Roads*, that is, male-oriented action-adventure fiction has as its basic subtext the description of a gay utopia where the male libido is unfettered, and takes directions both destructive and liberatory. Peckinpah is more critical than Burroughs in decrying the utopianism of this vision, arguing that male sexuality remains essentially repressed in the most "wild" circumstances and is manifest most often in violence, an idea Burroughs handles rather blithely. Unlike Burroughs, Peckinpah doesn't think sex and violence can exist together felicitously. But Burroughs's concerns are not alien or arcane to Peckinpah – their most overt presentation is the two gay gangsters played by Gig Young and Robert Webber in *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia*, probably the least condescending portrayal of gay men in the action cinema (admittedly, they are bad guys, but their homosexuality seems incidental to their badness and a straightforward revaluation of the

two-character male constructs in the Peckinpah Westerns). The death of the Gig Young character is portrayed tragically, the Webber character crying, "Johnny, Johnny!" as he leans over his dead sidekick. It is not ironic that Peckinpah was a favorite director of Jean Genet. Before producer Dieter Schidor obtained Genet's permission to film *Querelle* (1982), he was required by Genet to provide a letter of introduction from a prominent filmmaker. Schidor went straight to Peckinpah, who promptly obliged.⁸

It may even be argued that the film's paeans to its heroes are in part a classic idolatry of the male, whose beauty, heroism, and virility were conjoined in antiquity, except here again Peckinpah insists on the contradictions of such concepts. Pike's situation, both tragic and pathetic, is rendered best in the sand dune sequence when Pike mounts his horse after a bad fall on his game leg. In the film's most poignant scene, Pike, now clearly an old man, struggles upright amid the laughter of the Gorch brothers. Dutch/Ernest Borgnine, his face bathed in the preternatural glow of the morning sun, admires the resolute Pike riding off slowly, hunched over his horse in agony but nevertheless determined. The scene is an almost classical homage to the stoic, handsome male form, particularly if we see in it the intertext/back story of William Holden, the archetypal beefcake hero of classical Hollywood (Peckinpah once remarked that *The Wild Bunch* was in a sense "about Bill Holden in his fifties, no longer the glamour boy").

The scene that immediately follows (and effectively undercuts) this brilliant and sensitive sequence is a testimony to Peckinpah's integrity in its insistence on probing the contradictions of the male group and the society encompassing it. Old Sykes rides beside Pike, thanking him for the protection from Tector Gorch, praising Pike for his belief in sticking together, "just like it used to be." At this point Sykes learns that his grandson, Crazy Lee, was killed at San Rafael. Sykes is satisfied to learn that his lunatic grandson "did fine, just fine," but Pike, who only then is aware of Lee's relationship to his old mentor, is momentarily disturbed by the memory of his decision to use the young man as cannon fodder to aid the Bunch's escape. The film does not digress from the idea

that Pike is a vicious man for whom “codes” have become abstractions impossible to support. When Thornton claims Pike’s gun after the Aqua Verde massacre, he is both affirming his affection and conferring forgiveness; Thornton acknowledges Pike’s basic morality, which has managed to coexist with Pike’s failure and with the cruelty emerging from an attempt to prop up Pike’s idea of himself. What remains most graven in the consciousness of the viewer, however, is the slumped body of Pike, his right hand still clasping the grip of the machine gun, surrounded by shell casings and dead bodies. There has seldom been an image of the male hero, either vanquished or triumphant, so simultaneously spectacular, evocative, and revolting. We are reminded that the sign systems of patriarchy are built on piles of the dead and that mass death reifies these systems.

THE WEST AS WASTELAND

The Wild Bunch is at least as forceful as the Italian Western in debunking the conventions of the genre and in using its thematics to attack fundamental premises of American civilization. The bounty hunter, romanticized in the TV series *Wanted: Dead or Alive*, and at worst depicted as the last-ditch enterprise of the down-and-out gunfighter nevertheless noble (*The Tin Star*, 1957), takes a new turn in the 1960s. Portrayed as amoral pragmatists by Sergio Leone, bounty hunters are in Peckinpah’s film simply vermin, lumpenized elements who function as metaphors for the world of the film. The constant bickering of T.C./L.Q. Jones and Coffey/Strother Martin, their avarice, and their stupidity (“Don’t fire at the army, you idiots!”) is emblematic of the internecine warfare, gangsterism, and betrayal apparent everywhere. T.C. and Coffey are the kind of peripheral comic figures who, as in classical theater, contain in their actions some of the essential points of the narrative. The bounty hunters are associated with predatory birds in several important scenes, particularly the entry into Aqua Verde after the final massacre; we are reminded that Harri-gan, Mapache, Pike, and Thornton are all predators, and that the

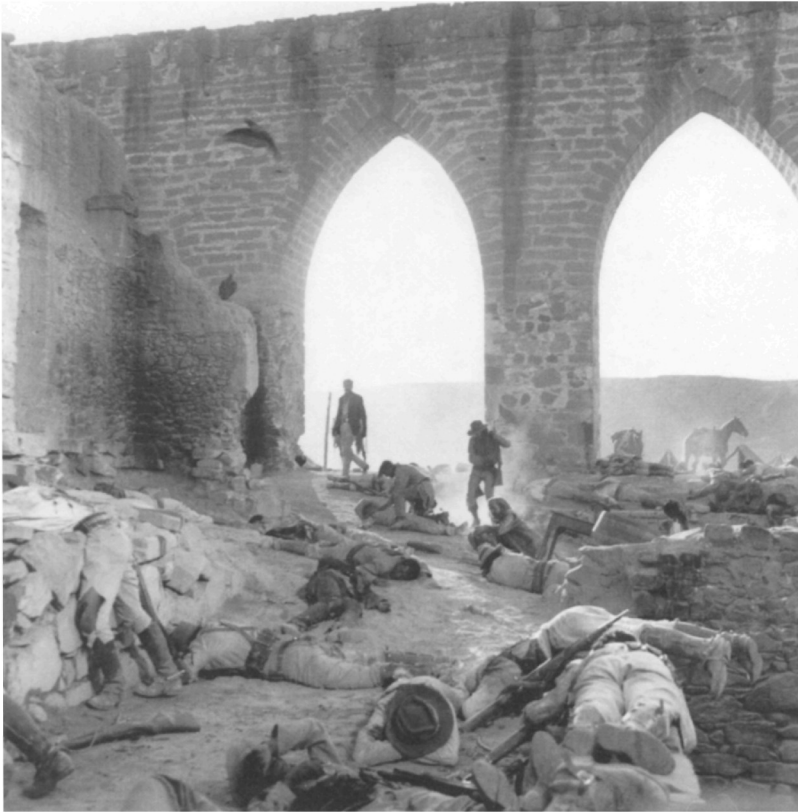
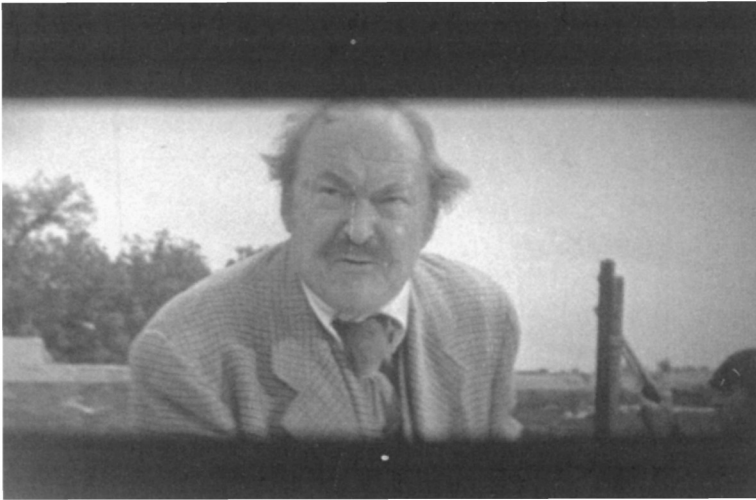


FIGURE 18

After the Aqua Verde massacre, the bounty hunters descend like vultures to loot the corpses.

victimization of people is central to this story and the frontier experience.

The railroad has long been regarded in the genre as a symbol of the harmful effects of technology on the Virgin Land (the “machine in the garden” idea), represented in such disparate films as *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962) and *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1967). After a long period in the Western wherein the railroad represented the essential rightness of the American civilizing process (*The Iron Horse*, 1924), by the time of *Liberty Valance*

**FIGURE 19**

Harrigan (left) personifies the savagery of unfettered capitalism.

and the Leone films, the railroad had become associated with the falsification of history that has become a preoccupation of the genre. In *For A Few Dollars More* (1965), the railroad is the force that propels Colonel Mortimer, “the finest shot in the Carolinas,” into becoming a paid killer. The railroad becomes the embodiment of expansionist industrial capital, and we come to learn who is paying the bills of all the gunmen patrolling the frontier. This is explicit in *Once Upon a Time in the West*, with Frank (Henry Fonda) a murderous emissary of railroad interests. Although Frank is far more malevolent and powerful than Thornton, Frank’s relationship to his tycoon boss is roughly equivalent to that of Thornton to Harrigan. A nice Brechtian conflation occurs in the film as Frank momentarily sits at the desk of his tycoon boss, remarking, “It feels almost like holding a gun, only much more powerful.” There is a chilling evocation of fascism in the scene (perhaps because of the presence of cowriter Bertolucci), with capital’s power finally usurped by its enforcement apparatus. Peckinpah’s film shares with Leone’s the idea of the railroad as battering ram for industrial cap-

ital. More specifically, *The Wild Bunch* shows the railroad to be the incarnation of everything hypocritical and morally reprehensible about capitalism. Harrigan is more than a railroad executive: he represents the hegemony of capitalism in the affairs of the state. The simple ideological point is that the police, the military, hired gunmen, and so on, are the enforcement apparatus *always* owned by the private sector. (Altman's *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* [1972] and, much later, Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man* [1996] expand on the notion of the gunfighter as agent of capital.) When Wainscoat, mayor of San Rafael, attacks Harrigan for "using our town as a battlefield," Harrigan retorts, "We represent the law." Indeed, Harrigan *is* the law. The sheriff of San Rafael is barely visible, and the voices of authority among the townsfolk are brushed aside by Harrigan. Frontier justice and the fair play honored by Ford are reduced here to the extralegal but absolute power of Harrigan, who relies upon mercenaries to capture the Bunch, with the U.S. Army an ancillary weapon of industry; the army's pursuit of the Bunch and Pancho Villa is really about protecting Harrigan's interests. The massacre at San Rafael engineered by Harrigan and the bounty hunters evokes as well capitalism's destruction of the society it supposedly sustains, the perfect evocation of Vietnam-era, destroy-the-village-in-order-to-save-it ideology discussed in relation to the film by Richard Slotkin.⁹ Thornton asks Harrigan, "How does it feel to hire your killings, with the law's arms around you?" Harrigan replies, "Good." It is noteworthy that Pike's banditry is aimed precisely at Harrigan and the railroad. Pike's attempt to make Harrigan change his ways seems to be an assault on the railroad as a particular encroachment on human freedom. While Pike and the rest of the Bunch are fascinated with technology (the awestruck moment around Mapache's car) and display typical male professional ingenuity as they deal with it (Pike saying, "What I don't know about, I sure as hell am going to learn" as he first hefts the stolen machine gun), Pike's first instinct at the final massacre after the killing of Mapache is to kill the German military envoy. Pike's last stand with the machine gun includes the apocalyptic demolition of the munitions stolen for the imperialist forces.

Organized religion, also a centerpiece of the classic Western, is shown here as an element of the superstructure brushed aside when it interferes, however marginally, with capitalism's interests. Mayor Wainscoat, leader of the temperance rally, is both the chief civic official and the town preacher. The merger of the two roles recapitulates Captain Reverend Clayton in *The Searchers*, Ford's idealized conjunction of religious and secular authority. In the character of Wainscoat this conjuncture is by no means felicitous since he is incompetent in both roles (Wainscoat had no foreknowledge of the ambush and leads his prayer meeting straight into the battle). More important, religion is an empty force constantly juxtaposed with the world of men, represented by Mapache, Harrigan, and the Bunch.

A discordant version of "Gather at the River" (a favorite Ford theme) is played by the Temperance Union orchestra just before the shooting starts; the song is picked up by Crazy Lee as he murders the railroad depot hostages. Peckinpah is deft in playing with the "Gather at the River" convention, as the song annotates the tension rather than the tranquility of the frontier community. The temperance meeting itself is attended for the most part by the very young and the elderly; the congregation stumbles, uncomprehending, through the temperance pledge Wainscoat recites. We first hear Wainscoat's biblical exhortations ("Do not take wine nor strong drink!") as we watch children playing with a nest of ants and scorpions – this violent image/sound configuration is one of Peckinpah's best evocations of Buñuel, a horrific depiction of society rending itself to pieces while simultaneously trying to support itself with traditional religious bromides. The immediate reference is the donkey devoured by the bees it transports in Buñuel's unnerving documentary *Las Hurdes* (1932). Peckinpah prefers, with Arthur Cravan, "mystery in broad daylight." Like Buñuel, Peckinpah sees the fantastically hideous in the commonplace phenomena most people blithely ignore out of a denial of essential facts of existence. Peckinpah's insistence on the violence of children goes beyond debunking childhood innocence to emphasize the cul-de-sac of civilization as he evokes his *Triumph of*

Death. That many of the children playing with the ants and scorpions are physically impaired underscores Peckinpah's sense of a godless, malevolent universe, and his antiauthoritarian temperament is always circumscribed by this recognition. His hard-nosed insistence on the material aspect of everyday life supports his radicalism and scoffs at the sentimental religiosity of the genre.

The most visceral depiction of the frontier as imperialist adventure appears when the Bunch approach Angel's village. We see a starving dog amid crumbling adobe and hear Dutch's remark, "That damn Huerta scraped it [the countryside] clean." The landscape of Peckinpah, long before Altman, Eastwood, and Jarmusch, is deromanticized. The arid Southwest is thoroughly inhospitable, made more so by the ambitions of men. Peckinpah's wide-angle lens is less about adoring vistas than about showing the scope of the carnage. The idyllic moment in Angel's village is such an abrupt rupture in the narrative that it can be seen only as a landscape of the imagination (perhaps in homage to *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* [1948], another key source), a glimpse of the utopian possibility that the film knows is unattainable. Throughout the film this scene continues to resonate, its mythic aspect affirmed in the film's final image. Following the scene in the village, we are brought back to the world of men via the reality facing the people of Mexico, their perpetual victimage. It is significant that in the two massacres, particularly the second, there are insert shots not just of the wounded innocents but also of ordinary people forced to observe, the strain of the lives they have already lived on their faces, now registering a final fear or, at points, merely inurement.

THE WILD BUNCH AND REVOLUTION

While Peckinpah insisted laconically that his film was about "bad men in changing times," it is clear that *The Wild Bunch* is a meditation not only on the construction of the male within American culture but also on the nature of evil and the origins of bourgeois notions of the criminal. Here too Peckinpah seems to

depend a good deal on Brecht and Buñuel for a sophisticated notion of criminality since he takes pains to separate the Bunch, finally depicted as noble, from the rest of their world, seen as wholly corrupt. The most telling scene is the early sequence in *Aqua Verde* when the Bunch, seated at an outdoor cafe, first spot Mapache and his minions. Pike makes a joking comparison between the Bunch and Mapache's army (and Mapache's German advisors). Dutch bristles at the equation, angrily telling Pike, "We don't hang nobody." Through Dutch's insights and Angel's actions, the Bunch (or, rather, Pike) come to a gradual recognition of a more genuine sense of honor, but claim it too late and for motives not fully resolved. Like Brecht's gangsters, Peckinpah's bad men are natural if hyperbolic manifestations of capitalism. Although Dutch is right to scold him, Pike is not wrong in saying that Mapache (and Harrigan?) is "like some others I could mention." But like *The Threepenny Opera*, *The Wild Bunch* asks if it is more evil "to open a bank than rob a bank." While Peckinpah, like Brecht, emphasizes the grotesquerie of capitalist civilization, he doesn't interrogate its attempts to protect its democratic façade. In *The Wild Bunch*, capitalism's veneer of democracy is transparent and irrelevant, and Peckinpah insists on this rapacity and murderousness as the true nature of this society. Before other revisionists of the Western, Peckinpah accomplishes this basic unmasking.

The first scene of the film, with the Bunch approaching in army gear, is less about playing with audience expectations (we assume the soldiers are good guys) than about suggesting the true face of state power and the basic institutions of patriarchal, capitalist society. The Bunch *are* as violent and rapacious as the state apparatus, and the state apparatus is as inept and comical as the Bunch. Like Pershing's army and Harrigan's paid killers, the Bunch are representative of the real order of things. As a metonym of the world that spawned them, they are as proficient at terror – and as idiotic and incompetent – as their rivals. It is noteworthy that the comedy of T.C. and Coffey is repeated by the Gorch brothers; for Peckinpah there is no "outside," no place from which we can watch from a critical distance. Hence comedy in Peckinpah, unlike, say,

Shakespeare, cannot annotate the action or provide insight concerning the larger world that we watch. Conversely, society's only adversaries to the established order, where they exist at all, are criminal fringe elements (the Bunch) driven by greed, whose transformation in the narrative flows from complex material circumstances rather than lofty idealism and a bent toward redemption. We are not concerned here with mercenaries with a heart of gold, as in *The Magnificent Seven*.

The liberation of Aqua Verde at the end might be said to be largely incidental, and a key issue remains the interchangeability of the various male groups. The Bunch do indeed eventually effectuate revolutionary violence in Mexico, and through much of the film their plight intersects with the plight of the poor. Above all, the Bunch's final "rebellion" has at its base issues of economy and ruptures within a historical moment that become manifest on the micro and macro levels, in terms of individual and group contradictions. The Marxist approach to criminality seems appropriate to understanding *The Wild Bunch* since the film's theme of lost innocence is tied to the search for community and human solidarity, an end to alienation, even if the aims are parochial despite grand-sounding rhetoric (Angel says: "I care about *my* people, *my* village, Mexico"). At Angel's village, Pike says guardedly to Don José, "You know what we are then." Don José responds, "Sí, the both of you!" Pike, Dutch, and Sykes, now breaking into laughter, retort, "And *you*!" While Pike expects Angel to forget family, village, Mexico itself (these are all the same in Angel's mind) if he wishes to continue in the Bunch's escapades, the village sequence helps to establish the most significant tension of the film: the need for affirmation of self versus the need to transform society. The village sequence tells us that the film is ultimately about Pike, the emblem of American individualism, who realizes the bankruptcy of his position too late.

The contradictions within Pike, the conflict of the real and the ideal, are only partially resolved in the shattering conclusion, with the Bunch's return for Angel, the final massacre, Thornton's reunion with Sykes, and the apotheosis of the Bunch. In the brothel

scene before the massacre, Pike's moment of grim self-appraisal/revulsion seems to affirm Angel's idealism and zeal as Pike recognizes the young prostitute's moral superiority to him. But Angel and Pike are killers of women, and their sexual violence is not unrelated to their romanticism. The point is made as the sensitive moment between Pike and the young whore is violated by the cruelty of the Gorches in the next room. Pike takes up Angel's battle, perhaps without being fully aware of how his self-nullification is also an affirmation of Angel's worst aspects and his own.

Much has been written about the Bunch's attempted rescue of Angel and the basic Anglos-in-Mexico themes of *The Wild Bunch* as a parable of the Vietnam invasion. As Richard Slotkin has noted, it is more useful to see *The Wild Bunch* as an undermining of the myths and conventions of the genre (*The Magnificent Seven*, *The Professionals*) than merely as a specific comment on the incursion into Southeast Asia, although the film's assault on its genre probably could not happen in a context other than the post-Tet Vietnam era.¹⁰ Above all, *The Wild Bunch* debunks the basic assumption that U.S. interventionism is selfless and benign. As Slotkin has argued, the sacrificial myth of the Last Stand that is essential to "interventionist Westerns" such as *The Alamo* and *The Magnificent Seven* is always an affirmation and sacralization of U.S. imperialist ideology and a demonization of the Other, so closely related is it to myths of antiquity such as the Crucifixion, Thermopylae, and Masada. The Last Stand of the Bunch jettisons this mythology as it recapitulates its basic themes. This Last Stand is an apocalyptic inferno presaged by the early moments of the film showing sick children watching a scorpion being killed by ants as it attempts to kill them, in the process stinging itself to death. As if the gods are no longer amused, the children finally intervene and make a conflagration of the anthill. The devastation of the Battle of Bloody Porch respects the nihilism of the prelude, which is central to the ideology of the film, its view of America. The notion of a "front line," with the good guys stolidly, relentlessly moving against the enemy, is gone, with Peckinpah often violating left-right continuity to upset our sense of space. The feeling of melee

also reiterates the confused and conflicted moral code of the Bunch and the world of men they represent. Women are murdered and become murderers; innocent civilians again become incidental targets.

Enough has been said about Peckinpah and childhood innocence; Pike's slaying by a boy gives closure to the anthill scene, the children playing cowboy in the carnage of San Rafael, and the torture of Angel gleefully assisted by children. The self-deception of childhood innocence is the foundation stone, for Peckinpah, of other myths of Hollywood genre cinema, including the goodness of small-town life, the centrality of religion, family, community. Bloody Porch is, after all, the place where Teresa was murdered by Angel (problematicizing our view of Angel as martyr as he is killed by Mapache) and where her funeral was angrily interrupted by an impatient Mapache. (The scene recapitulates the temperance rally, with the elderly Mexican women here reciting the rosary as they walk oblivious in procession past the screaming Zamora and the opulent banquet table laid out for the Bunch; only the Gorch brothers show any courtesy, as they did with the death of Buck, and this out of ignorant superstition that the elder Tector in any event says lacks "class.") The classic march to the showdown that precedes the massacre is a bold, hyperbolic stroke that seems to assert the nobility of the Bunch. Yet it is also apparent that Pike's decision ("Let's go!") has little to do with anything beyond personal interests and failures (about the death of Aurora, Pike says, "There's isn't a day or an hour that goes by that I don't think about it"). That the people of Aqua Verde seem oblivious to the march of the Bunch suggests the questionable nature of this final act of liberation.

There seems little ideological equivocation, however, in the film's final moments, with the Bunch not only liberators (the guns end up with the peasants at least) but with both Thornton and Sykes finally understanding that their only sensible place is with the revolution. The liberation entails, of course, the destruction of Aqua Verde. It is hard to say what Sykes and Thornton think about the ideology of Villa, but the film makes clear what the

remainder of the Bunch will be up to. Sykes says, "Me and the boys have some work to do. It ain't like it used to be . . . but it'll do," to which Thornton chuckles, acknowledging Sykes as he rises to join him. A *campanero* carries the machine gun from the gates of Aqua Verde. Sykes rides with Don José, the elder from Angel's village. Just as Don José acknowledged his kinship with the outlaws during their stay at his village, the Bunch (what is left of them) acknowledge kinship with Angel, Don José, and the people of Mexico. Here Peckinpah fully constructs the bandit as outsider and rebel. As Dutch says to Colonel Mohr, "We're not associated with anybody." Of course, the Bunch ultimately find something larger, although rather unconsciously, than their own camaraderie and bankrupt macho code, finally embracing the marginalized people who are either bewildered by them or who idealize them. The laughter at the conclusion (coinciding with the laughter of the dead members of the Bunch, superimposed on the image, suggesting an acknowledgment and blessing of Thornton and Sykes's decision) is not sardonic or cavalier; it suggests quite simply that the path of the Bunch always led to this moment. The final image, the Bunch's entry into Valhalla (with the strains of "La Golondrina" describing a complete utopian space), is Peckinpah's most romantic gesture, but the contradictions are again poignant and compelling.

The scenes in Angel's village, particularly the Bunch's farewell, are among the great evocations of serenity in American cinema. As the Gorch brothers play cat's cradle with a peasant girl, Pike laughingly says, "Now *that* I find hard to believe," to which Don José responds, "Not so hard. We all dream of being a child again, even the worst of us . . . perhaps the worst most of all." Interestingly, on the mention of "worst" the camera cuts to a distraught Angel, the idealist of the group, flying into a rage over the betrayal by Teresa. Is Angel the worst? Don José remarks that for Angel, Teresa was "a goddess, to be worshipped from afar. To Mapache she was a mango, ripe and waiting." Pike says laconically, "Angel dreams of love and Mapache eats the mango." Angel's romantic dream, resulting in the cold-blooded murder of Teresa, shows how

his notion of "goddess" is entrenched in the virgin-whore construction of the female so essential to Western civilization. Just before the murder, Pike tries to restrain Angel, who complains, "She was my woman!" Pike consoles Angel: "I know, I know." Pike's consolation refers us to his own culpability in the murder of Aurora and the misogyny at the base of romantic love. The scenes in Angel's village and the subsequent murder of Teresa bring into question the romanticism of the Western itself. Pike and Angel, the older man-young acolyte construct central to the male-oriented genre cinema, are always associated with each other, the terrible failed potentiality of the younger man shown to be a reflection of the history and values of the *jefe* with whom he wants to ride.

Pike (it is really his tale entirely) and the others represent an American idealism long since corrupted, its energies spent, its politics turned into exaggerated individualism. More than any film since *Citizen Kane*, *The Wild Bunch* is a meditation on America's promise versus its actuality. The seemingly throwaway vignette at the rail depot in the opening shows the importance of an establishing sequence to a skilled artist. The depot supervisor dresses down a clerk: "I don't care what you *meant* to do . . . it's what you *did* I don't like." The promise has no relationship to the realization. In Thornton's words, "What I want and what I need are two different things." Charles Foster Kane in *Citizen Kane* burns his Declaration of Principles (a metaphor for the scrapping of the Constitution by capitalism); Pike flees from Thornton, causes Aurora's death, and sacrifices Crazy Lee and Angel while admonishing his underlings to keep things "just like it used to be."

The film foresees the America that emerged in its wake in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s as a cult of nostalgia for a lost America (that never existed) and "traditional values" complemented a savage assault on the public sector and the welfare state and a destruction of the social contract. The remaining remnant of American notions of freedom may have some role in effectuating genuine social change, but the amount of waste and savagery represented in the world of *The Wild Bunch* leaves such a possibility

in doubt. While the film suggests that revolution is the only avenue to social transformation, such a conviction cannot mitigate the jaundiced view of the entire American adventure. For this Peckinpah will probably be regarded chiefly as a cynic or nihilist, but the contradictions of his work, particularly as we view them in an era that prefers to ignore contradictions, make his art among the most crucial analyses of the failure of the American experiment. *The Wild Bunch* is involved in more than homage for a dead past; it is a recognition of how that past was probably always a deceit.

NOTES

- 1 David Weddle, "Dead Man's Clothes: The Making of *The Wild Bunch*," *Film Comment*, May-June 1994, pp. 44-57.
- 2 Andrew Britton, "Sideshow: Hollywood in Vietnam," *Movie* 27-8, (Winter 1980-Spring 1981), pp. 20-3.
- 3 Jim Kitses, *Horizons West: Anthony Mann, Budd Boetticher, Sam Peckinpah; Studies of Authorship in the Western* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969).
- 4 Paul Seydor, *Peckinpah: The Western Films* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980).
- 5 David A. Cook, *A History of Narrative Film* (New York: Norton, 1981), p. 631.
- 6 Robin Wood et al., *The American Nightmare* (Toronto Festival of Festivals, 1979), p. 17.
- 7 Kitses, p. 175.
- 8 See Dietor Schidor's foreword to Rainer Werner Fassbinder, *Querelle: The Film Book*, trans. Arthur S. Wensinger and Richard H. Wood (New York and Munich: Schirmer/Mosel-Grove Press, 1983), p. 6.
- 9 Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Atheneum, 1992), pp. 593-613.
- 10 Ibid.

3 **“Back Off to What?” Enclosure, Violence, and Capitalism in Sam Peckinpah’s *The Wild Bunch***

Approximately thirty minutes into *The Wild Bunch*, after the disastrous Starbuck job, Pike, obviously weary of his outlaw existence, says to Dutch, “I’d like to make one good score and back off.” When Dutch replies, “Back off to what?” we see the core of Peckinpah’s intent in the film: to depict the outlaw’s violent, materialistic life as a dead end. Indeed, almost from its opening moments, *The Wild Bunch* deals with images of enclosure that suggest a sense of finality. A feeling of enclosure is created when the Bunch ride into Starbuck, where they are surrounded on all sides by bounty hunters, and it is repeated in other actions in the film: during the initial entrance of the Bunch into Agua Verde, the delivery of guns to Mapache’s henchman in a canyon, and the final shootout in Agua Verde. What all of these scenes of enclosure naturally involve is the notion of space both as a physical construct and as a metaphor for various kinds of limitation or entrapment. Given Peckinpah’s masterful dramatization in the film of significant themes such as loyalty, friendship, and honor, along with *The Wild Bunch*’s continuing influence as a film notable for its breakthrough representational techniques, I think it would be productive to investigate *The Wild Bunch*’s use of space with regard to how it relates to some of the film’s major concerns: memory,

interpersonal relations, and the influence that money exerts on human behavior.¹

Let's take a few preliminary examples of the enclosure motif as it emerges early in the film. At *The Wild Bunch*'s beginning, the Bunch ride past a group of children. Two of the men, Pike and Dutch, turn slightly to look down, and what they see is the children torturing some scorpions, which, along with some ants, have been placed within a wooden cage. The despairing Shakespearean citation "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods – they kill us for their sport" immediately comes to mind at this point, especially given the feeling of arbitrary cruelty that is being dramatized. Equally strong, though, is the notion of entrapment, which is here trebled, since the insects are not only surrounded by the wooden cage and hemmed in by the semicircle of children who stand around gaping as their "sport" proceeds but are also enclosed within the encompassing gaze of the members of the Bunch.

The relation between violence and entrapment should appear obvious given the fascination that the insects' torture holds for the children: violence itself is a trap, a stultifying form of behavior that has negative consequences for both perpetrator and victim, locking individuals into a series of actions and reactions that become self-reinforcing and virtually addictive.²

That Pike and Dutch seem, in spite of themselves, fascinated with and appalled by the behavior of the children torturing the ants and scorpions highlights not only the attraction of violence but also its potential for obscuring self-awareness. Were they perceptive enough, what Pike and Dutch would realize on a conscious level while watching the children is what they undoubtedly intuit subconsciously: that the children's game represents these men's lives in miniature – an existence in which brutality and self-gratification are inextricably linked. Indeed, this is perhaps why so much of the laughter in *The Wild Bunch* is caused by the misfortune or ridiculing of characters such as Lyle (when he is denied whiskey after the train heist) or Angel (when he is captured by Mapache).

Given the fact that Peckinpah doubtless wishes the audience

to draw a connection between the children's actions and those of the Bunch, we should recall at this point Don José's comment during the fiesta in Angel's village. "We all wish to be a child again," Don José says, "even the worst of us – maybe the worst most of all." Yet the childlike nature to which Don José alludes, by which he seems to mean a state of innocence, is not present in the film. The children whom we see in *The Wild Bunch* are associated with cruelty and brutality. Aside from the children torturers, there are the youngsters who "replay" the Starbuck massacre, circling a dead man and "shooting" him with their hands; the infant suckled by a Mexican woman whose bandolier strap lies between her breasts (according to Peckinpah, then, violence and dependency are yoked from the time of early childhood; perhaps there is the suggestion here that violence is itself a form of dependency); and the young boy who delivers the coup de grace to Pike at the end of the Agua Verde massacre. The only other child of note is the baby of the woman with whom Pike has sex toward the film's end. Yet this child represents not a peaceful reality but a life involving love and family that for Pike and the Bunch never was and never could have been. We thus feel a strong sense of limited possibilities and obscured self-awareness in the film, which is communicated via its imagery, its ethics, and, as will be seen, its attitude toward capitalism.

In one of the monochrome freeze-frame shots during the film's opening titles, the Bunch, after passing by the children at the ant cage, are seen headed down a row of railroad tracks that seem to represent a narrowing of possibilities, especially given their association with Thornton, who is being blackmailed by the railroad man Harrigan. That the freeze-frame shot emphasizes the tracks' diminishing perspective also suggests a tie-in with Harrigan, whose steely adamancy and lack of humanistic response typify not only the narrowness of his character but also, by extension, the capitalist organization that he represents, which, like all railroads, was doubtless ruthless in its appropriation of land and its manipulation of manpower. Thus, in the film's opening moments, some of its major meanings have already been suggested: enclosure as a

metaphor for physical, psychological, and ethical limitation; entrapment; arbitrary violence; fateful inevitability; and capitalism. The relations among these notions will be developed as the film continues.

The opening sequences's freeze-frame monochrome images do more than merely relegate the Bunch to a black-and-white newspaper/historical past; they also have a spatial suggestiveness, since when the image shifts to a stylized black and white, the majority of its depth disappears.³ The repeated collapsing of physical space in the film suggests a further thematic: that violence involves a type of enclosure that has not only psychological but also ethical ramifications, that it is part of a realm that lacks moral depth, and that it can only be enjoyed if it is abstracted from the context in which it occurs, a realm in which brutality causes real death, real pain, real suffering.

It's quite likely that in making the violence in *The Wild Bunch* so graphic, Peckinpah did indeed intend (as he often claimed) to show people how terrible it really is, and that the only people who could find the film's violence entrancing are those who fail to draw a connection between its reality and its fictive representation. Just as people who are themselves violent may to a degree see their own acts of violence as somewhat unreal (which thereby helps to make its continuation possible), filmgoers who do not treat *The Wild Bunch's* violence as real may see it as fictively unreal because doing so suits their desire for an aesthetic appreciation of violence that only someone at a safe and pleasant distance from it could achieve. However, in doing so, these individuals fail to react in the complex way that the director wanted them to. As Peckinpah once commented:

The point of the film is to take this façade of movie violence and open it up, get people involved in it so that they are starting to go in the Hollywood television predictable reaction syndrome, and then twist it so that it's not fun anymore, just a wave of sickness in the gut. . . . It's ugly, brutalizing, and bloody fucking awful . . . and yet there's a certain response that you get from it, an excitement that we're all violent people.⁴

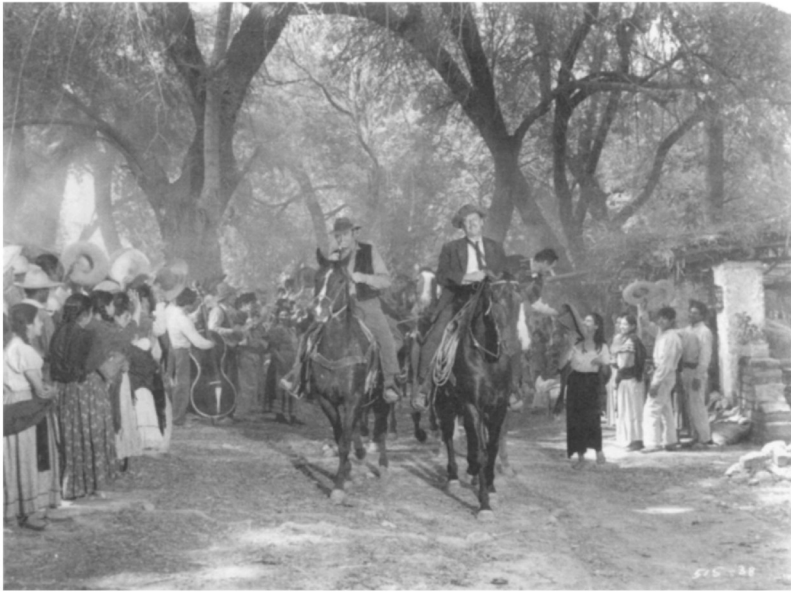
When he made this statement in 1969, Peckinpah was aware of the tremendous effect that *The Wild Bunch's* violence was having on audiences. Many critics thought that the film's representations of cruelty were self-indulgent and disgusting; others rationalized them. Regardless of one's feelings on this issue, it's questionable if there really is, as Peckinpah claims, a turning point in the violence (the "twist" to which he refers), a juncture at which one can discern a change from representation to overrepresentation. And though the shootouts at the film's beginning and end surpass virtually anything else in cinema, their exaggerations don't guarantee that the audience will stop at Peckinpah's turning points to reflect on their reactions to what they're seeing, which is what Peckinpah implies.

Moreover, although these sequences certainly cause the kind of "excitement" to which Peckinpah draws attention, this doesn't mean that the audience, having been excited, will then become ashamed about their reaction to the violence. Indeed, just the opposite effect was often seen in audience members during the violent scenes in *The Wild Bunch* and in comparable sequences, such as the farmhouse assault sequence in *Straw Dogs*, during the screening of which one audience member yelled out (presumably to Dustin Hoffman's David Sumner, who was defending his house against gang attack), "Kill 'em all!" Perhaps the most that can be said at this point about *The Wild Bunch's* representation of violence is that, like so much else in Peckinpah's films, it involves a degree of contrariety, precisely what makes the film such a fascinating work of art.

If we turn to a consideration of the Starbuck shootout, we find that these scenes also contain powerfully contradictory forces. The explosiveness of the action – with men, women, and children running and being thrown in all directions – is carefully counter-balanced by the manner in which the scene is shot, for although the rapid-fire editing often seems to "open up" the action (suggesting, at the very least, if not the possibility of freedom then the excitement created by Peckinpah's photographic and editorial technique), the effect of this technique is often undermined by a

great deal of what we subsequently witness. We are given images of bodies and animals colliding; of people being hurtled toward the ground; of a man falling into the small enclosure of a store window; of the bounty hunters, virtually shoulder to shoulder, jockeying for better positions from which to shoot. At one point, Thornton fires at Pike. However, instead of hitting Pike, Thornton's shot wounds a tuba player, who passes into a space in front of Pike that hadn't seemed to be there before (thus reminding us that a cinematic image photographed with a telephoto lens poorly represents the amount of space between people). Perhaps this act results from Thornton's slow reaction time, which suggests the onset of an old age characterized by a narrowing down of physical possibilities (as Pike later says of himself, "ain't getting around any better," a statement whose tone of finality is amplified when we later learn of his thigh wound). Possibly the musician is hit because of the speed at which he is moving (which seems less likely given the instrument's bulk and weight). Regardless of which explanation we adopt, the shot's significance is virtually the same: human beings' behavior is governed by forces (the passage of time, external events) over which they have virtually no control. We thus recall the railroad office manager's statement: "I don't care what you meant to do; it's what you did I don't like." Even one's own best intentions collapse under the weight of circumstance. Undoubtedly, Pike and Thornton didn't mean for their lives to turn out as they did, but like virtually everyone else in this film, they are trapped by the weight of present conditions, which are predominantly a function of past actions. Almost all of the characters in *The Wild Bunch* are locked into a loop of determined behaviors, a situation to which they find it extremely difficult to resign themselves, even if they realize that they may, to a degree, have determined these behaviors themselves. In *The Wild Bunch*, then, not only passing time but also progressively limited choices narrow one toward death, an idea reflected in the film's conception of physical and psychological space.

It's only during the ride-out from Angel's village that a dramatic sense of spatial depth – and, thereby, figurative freedom from in-

**FIGURE 20**

The Bunch leave Angel's village, depicted as a lush world of peace and calm.

evitability – is created. As the Bunch leave, they pass between two rows of villagers. The profusion of background material in the frame (trees, village structures) and the presence of sunlight filtering down through the trees create a great sense of depth. The ride-out is a fitting culmination of the fiesta scenes' sense of celebration and tranquility. For a brief time, the Bunch have entered the apparently limitless and lush green world of repose, freed for the most part from their past-haunted statuses (although Peckinpah reminds us of this aspect when he photographs Pike under a tree, alone, staring wistfully into the distance). Yet one should appreciate that the entire village interlude is suspiciously realized. Supposedly plundered by Huerta's men, the village nonetheless yields up a bounty of food that belies the previous suggestions of its poverty (e.g., the starving dog on its outskirts and Don José's comments about the villagers' cattle and grain being taken from

them). The sincerity of the director's romantic intentions is the only genuine part of these scenes; the rest represents Peckinpah's admirable but (given his film's overall tone) inappropriate attempt to invoke feelings of possibility rather than entrapment, freedom rather than determinism, concepts that in the context of the film's emphasis on limitation seem quaint but, ultimately, forced and false. In *The Wild Bunch's* universe, dimensionality, depth, and possibility are repeatedly set off against, and ultimately yield to, entrapment, inevitability, and death.

One of the notions that the film appropriates is Frederick Jackson Turner's concept of the frontier as a realm of opportunities that is rapidly closing. Turner's thesis concerning the frontier remains as controversial today as when it was first presented at a meeting of the American Historical Society in 1893. Turner advanced the idea that the defining aspect of American territorial settlement was the notion of unexplored territories that, Turner felt, had significance not just as physical land masses but as symbolic realms connoting opportunity and new beginnings. According to Turner, the frontier generated American optimism for the future. Regardless of the validity of the thesis (and it has been widely debated since it was proposed),⁵ the essential point is that in *The Wild Bunch*, Peckinpah has chosen to dramatize it. And why not – especially since the kind of tension in the Turner essay between possibility and entrapment is endemic to Peckinpah's vision in this film.

Initially, Turner asserts, the frontier was regarded as promising a new life:

American development has exhibited not merely advance along a single line, but a return to primitive conditions on a continually advancing frontier line, and a new development for that area. American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character.⁶

Yet though he generally avoids drawing attention to contradictory forces, Turner nonetheless does so implicitly. From a work he refers to as "Peck's New Guide to the West," Turner quotes the unnamed author's delineation of a tripartite wave of westward migration. This migration begins with pioneers, who have "rude" agricultural tools and who build log cabins; they are followed by people who purchase the pioneers' land and "improve" it with bridges, houses with windows and chimneys, and such things as schools and courthouses. Finally come "the men of capital and enterprise," who buy the land from the previous owners, who in turn push on, themselves eventually to become men of enterprise.⁷

What do we see outlined here but the rise of capitalism, of which Turner implicitly approves? Yet not once in his essay does Turner address the question that his citation from the Peck book implicitly raises: weren't there negative consequences to the so-called progress to which he is here giving his sanction? And how did such "progress" affect the notion of the frontier spirit – that spirit, with its yearning to escape from confinement, that now seems to have mutated into a conventionalism tied to property and acquisition, concepts connotatively opposed to the forces of freedom that the pioneer supposedly embodied?

Turner did recognize that there were some problems with the psychology of Americans. At one point he notes, "as has been indicated, the frontier is productive of individualism. Complex society is precipitated by the wilderness into a kind of primitive organization based on the family. The tendency is anti-social. It produces antipathy to control, and particularly to any direct control."⁸ While one might read this resistance to control as a hallmark of admirable individualism, it is also a quality that Turner sees as easily yielding to the capitalist desire for what is really nothing more than fiscal self-aggrandizement. Perhaps not surprisingly, we find that the Bunch embody these characteristics as well. Although the Bunch obviously relish their freedom, they pay a heavy price for it, as we can see from the fact that they are homeless, romantically unattached, and apparently poverty-

ridden (e.g., when the Bunch first enter Agua Verde as a group, Dutch draws attention to how little silver he has left). It is thus highly ironic (and, to risk neologizing, Turneresque) that for the sake of money, the Bunch compromise their freedom by entering into an agreement with Mapache that, knowing the “general’s” untrustworthy personality, they realize is not only risky but even treasonous (thus Dutch’s “that’s hitting pretty close to home, ain’t it?” – the only indication in the film that the Bunch may have some feeling of loyalty to the United States). Contradiction and irresolution, then, are built into these men’s character, and it’s quite possible that the conflicted feelings that the Bunch have about the deal with Mapache to a degree reflect Peckinpah’s feelings about the deals he felt compelled to make with studio executives so that he could produce his films (projects that, like the train heist, he would repeatedly resolve to “do right”). With the exception of *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia*, Peckinpah eventually came to feel that all of these deals were not only compromised but compromising.

As Leo Marx points out in *The Machine in the Garden*, although the longing for the type of freedom that Turner’s frontier represents seems to be innate, this tendency is also potentially dangerous. Marx refers to “popular and sentimental” pastoralism, which is essentially the desire for freedom and open land on which Turner’s thesis rests, as something of an illusion. He characterizes this type of pastoralism as

an expression less of thought than of feeling. It is widely diffused in our culture, insinuating itself into many kinds of behavior. An obvious example is the “flight from the city.” An inchoate longing for a more “natural” environment enters into the contemptuous attitude that many Americans adopt toward urban life . . . wherever people turn away from the hard social and technological realities this obscure sentiment is likely to be at work.⁹

In other words, the frontier doesn’t promise freedom so much as a flight from responsibility. At one point in his essay, even Turner recognizes the problem inherent in idealizing the frontier:

The democracy born of free land, strong in selfishness and individualism, intolerant of administrative experience and education, and pressing individual liberty beyond its proper bounds, has its dangers as well as benefits. Individualism in America has allowed a laxity in regard to governmental affairs which has rendered possible the spoils system and all the manifest evils that follow from the lack of a highly developed civic spirit . . . the colonial and revolutionary frontier was the region whence emanated many of the worst forms of an evil currency.¹⁰

It doesn't require a major leap from a recognition of the problems implicit in the spirit of freedom proposed by Turner to an acknowledgment of the link between this reckless abandonment of responsibility and the actions of the Wild Bunch. Despite being outlaws who believe that they live by a code, the Bunch continually subvert it. Although the Bunch, like Turner's pioneers, embody the desire for a new land where they can be free (Pike, wanting to take refuge in Mexico, says, "I'm tired of being hunted"),¹¹ they nonetheless carry within themselves an impulse toward acquisitiveness that compels them to keep stealing, thereby constantly hazarding the freedom that they so strongly crave. Throughout the film, it is easy to see how Pike's code of "stick[ing] together" is compromised by the Bunch's avarice, self-interest, and (on the part of the Gorches) racism. One might even read the code as a defense of remaining fast with one's possessions, of staying within a group only because it profits one to do so. Peckinpah wants us to realize how conflicted these men's motivations and actions are. He shows us the Bunch wonderfully acting in concert during the train heist, but to what end do they do so? To get gold (which undoubtedly to some extent represents money stolen from the Mexican peasantry) and furnish a pseudogeneral with ammunition in an antirevolutionary campaign, thereby making them pragmatically not very different from the man for whom they are stealing the weapons. They stick together when, before going back into Agua Verde to escape Thornton and his men, they greedily bury their ill-gotten gold "together." Even when Pike offers to buy the captured Angel back from Mapache, he only offers half of his gold for him, an offer spurned for good reason: Mapache is less

interested in money than in living up to his own (admittedly somewhat corrupt) values. "I need no gold, and I don't sell this one," Mapache says.

Complementing these notions of destructively self-contained self-interest is *The Wild Bunch's* repeated focus on the past, which is, of course, unchangeable. As they appear in the film, Pike's memories are filled with notions of violence and enclosure. The two extended flashbacks that we see involve sex, violence, and death. In the sequence with the prostitutes, the ambience is claustrophobic and, given the scene's circumstances (it takes place after a robbery), potentially menacing. If the room in which we see Pike and Thornton has any windows, they are covered with thick drapes. Pike is bracketed by two women; a third is pushed into the already crowded space by Thornton. There is no feeling of celebration – or even humor, as there was after the Starbuck robbery. Instead, these men are engaged in what might most accurately be described as enforced (and purchased) pleasure. When the sense of menace becomes concrete with the arrival of two Pinkerton men, one of whom fires, hitting Thornton, Pike escapes through another room's window. Yet as the existence of the flashback makes clear, although Pike avoids capture, he takes with him the memory of selfishly motivated abandonment, a quality with which he continually contends throughout the film.

In the second flashback, which involves Pike's lover Aurora, sex, death, and violence are once again yoked. Like its predecessor, this flashback, which is "replayed" toward the film's end when Pike backs into a room in which there is a soldier and a Mexican woman (thus the trap of painful, repetitive memories), also suggests a poverty of emotional commitment and a concurrent, symbolic spatial restrictiveness. Pike is first seen bearing flowers and groceries, material bribes meant to excuse his tardiness. Later, we see Pike in Aurora's small bedroom. The dim lighting is at once romantic and menacing; once again, a gun-toting, vengeful figure emerges through a doorway and wounds someone. After recounting this story, Pike comments, "not a day goes by that I don't think about it." His statement reminds us not only of Thornton's



FIGURE 21

Pike with Aurora in a flashback that reveals his emotional pain and obsession with the past.

obsessive memory of being whipped in jail but also of another assertion in a comparably revelatory scene with Dutch, during which Pike talks about his long-standing feud with the railroad. After Dutch says, “you must have really hurt that railroad bad,” Pike replies, “there was a man there, name of Harrigan. Had a way of doing things. I made him change his way.” The remark reveals how fixated Pike (and, by extension, Harrigan, who is obsessed with Pike’s capture) is on this particular vendetta. Three characters in the film, then – Pike, Thornton, and Harrigan – are filled with memories of betrayal, deceit, and blackmail, memories that produce feelings of either guilt, anger, or shame. Pike feels guilty about abandoning Thornton; Thornton feels anger at Pike over the abandonment, which placed him in the clutches of Harrigan, who already had an ingrained vendetta against Pike (and, perhaps, Thornton, too, since it seems probable that the robbery that occasioned

Thornton's capture was against the railroad). Other characters in the film are also involved in situations that call forth guilt and resentment: it's likely that Angel's ex-girl friend, Teresa, feels some degree of shame about running off from Angel's village and breaking her engagement with him; Angel is worried that the villagers may find out that he is a member of the Bunch. Because of her daughter's death, Teresa's mother bears a natural antipathy toward Angel, as does Mapache when he finds out that the major betrayer against him is Mexican. All of these people, with the notable exception of the virtually conscience-free Gorches, devote a great deal of psychological energy to thinking about past deeds, done by them or against them, and thereby reveal that narrowing of consciousness that is one of the main qualities in this film about limits.

When we explore some of the apparent textual bases for Peckinpah's ideas about violence in the film, we find in them also repeated citations involving narrowing and circumscription. Although Peckinpah has cited Robert Ardrey's *The Territorial Imperative* and *African Genesis* as sources for his ideas about violence and aggression, this reference seems somewhat curious given the pretentiousness, vapidity, and meandering, argumentative method of these two books, which posit that both the desire for land and an innate tendency toward slaughter are the motivating behavioral principles of human beings. Far more relevant to the attitudes regarding violence in *The Wild Bunch* are Konrad Lorenz's *On Aggression* and Hannah Arendt's *On Violence*.

Lorenz notes that among animals in the jungle, aggression has a rational basis: it is used only in defending territory.¹² Yet even within this designation, Lorenz draws attention to another attribute that implicitly links his ideas about aggression with my assertions about *The Wild Bunch*:

We can safely assume that the most important function of intra-specific aggression is the even distribution of animals over an inhabitable area, but it is certainly not the only one. Charles Darwin had already observed that sexual selection, the selection of the best and strongest animals for reproduction, was furthered by the fighting of rival animals, particularly males.¹³

If we view territory as relating not only to land but also to people, we can see that much of the basis for the fighting within the Bunch and between the Bunch and others is sexually based. To go back to the flashback sequences, two of the three involve women as (capitalist) property: the whores in the first flashback, the sense on the part of both Pike and Aurora's husband that Aurora is "theirs." This quality surfaces as well in the rivalry between Angel and Mapache concerning Teresa, although Mapache's blithe reaction after Teresa's death seems to echo the usual attitude of the Gorches, who share women all of the time. Yet it is the Gorches who most pointedly draw attention to Teresa as property ("well, she ain't your woman no more") and who taunt Angel regarding the supposedly off-limits status of his sister, mother, and even grandmother when they are about to enter his village.¹⁴

Hannah Arendt disagrees with Lorenz's implication that violence, which she conceives of in terms of warfare, stems from an "irrepressible instinct of aggression."¹⁵ Rather, she views it as a device that functions as an "arbiter in international affairs for which no adequate substitute has been found."¹⁶ This last observation makes it easy to see that *The Wild Bunch's* focus on violence necessarily implies the field in which it most obviously manifests itself: politics. Arendt quotes from C. Wright Mills's book *The Power Elite*: "all politics is a struggle for power; the ultimate kind of power is violence."¹⁷ In this context, two of the film's characters immediately come to mind – not Mapache or Huerta or Villa but Harrigan and Mohr, who are conceptually linked. Both men are power-allied individuals who manipulate minor politicians or functionaries. After the Starbuck massacre, when Mayor Wainscoat complains that the railroad "used our town as a battlefield," Harrigan, in a haughty voice, asserts, "we represent the law." The implication is clear: appointed or elected officials are less important than the men who have money, and who use their money to create laws that favor them alone. As for Mohr, the power that he invokes in the film easily dwarfs Harrigan's since it is not regional but international (as a result, our antipathy to Mohr seems greater than our dislike of Harrigan: we're quite glad when Mohr gets shot).

In a tone whose arrogance invites comparison with Harrigan's way of speaking, Mohr identifies himself as "Commander Frederick Mohr of the Imperial German Army." Clearly, Mohr represents the most despicable power of government: the ability to wage war, which is, as Machiavelli points out, the ultimate source of governments' influence over individuals. Both Harrigan and Mohr wage war – Harrigan masterminded the mini-battle of Starbuck; Mohr is in Mexico because his government wishes to enlist Mexico's aid in the impending global upheaval of what would become World War I – and both men wield the influence of money and property, coextensive forces that act in the name of repression. As the presence in *The Wild Bunch* of these two characters so amply demonstrates, economic influence in the film is political influence (and vice versa), and political influence, as we've just seen during the Starbuck shootout, involves the use of violent force.

Although the use of force in *The Wild Bunch* is clearly prevalent, what may not be as clear is that, as Arendt emphasizes, there is an important distinction between force and power, one that brings into relief the impotence of the characters in the film who, like Pike and Dutch, mistake violence for force rather than as an expression of futility. As Arendt points out, "out of the barrel of a gun grows the most effective command, resulting in the most instant and perfect obedience. What can never grow out of it is power."¹⁸ Perhaps more to the point, though, is that in the Bunch's violence we see reflected a state of mind that necessarily involves the limitations of a lifestyle defined by a narrow series of choices. According to Arendt, "It has often been said that impotence breeds violence, and psychologically this is quite true, at least of persons possessing natural strength, moral or physical. Politically speaking, the point is that loss of power becomes a substitution of violence for power . . . violence can destroy power [but] it is utterly incapable of creating it."¹⁹ Keeping these statements in mind, we can see that the Bunch are purveyors not of strength but of weakness. The Bunch's violence is a sign of their futile self-loathing; their bonding is often the result of little more than mutual greed. These aspects are repeatedly dramatized in the film,

which pulls us in one direction and then another, first making the Bunch seem admirable, then showing us their brutal side. Ultimately, though, *The Wild Bunch* focuses on the Bunch making mistakes, acting frustrated, carrying out acts of violence in response to whims of frustration. The vendetta against (and by) Harrigan, the drawing of guns during the argument about the Starbuck “silver,” the killing of Teresa – all of these situations (and there are many more in the film) demonstrate how much emphasis *The Wild Bunch* places on poor justifications for excessive force.

A further issue raised by the film is whether or not violence is a behavior that is consciously motivated (Arendt’s view) or an instinctual act (as Lorenz contends). Again, the film’s view is conflicted. There is a great deal of ruminating about violence in *The Wild Bunch* (certainly Pike’s and Thornton’s constantly reflecting on past events associated with violence tells us this), and situations rife with a potential for violence occur often. However, when violence does finally erupt, the participants in these situations seem to be acting as though they are so caught up in the events that there is simply no time for thought, only action. Violence, then, often seems to be fueled by its own curious energy, which appears to be independent of the energy exhibited by the participants in it. *The Wild Bunch* shows us that there is a line that is crossed in human behavior between reason and a madness allied with ferocity; and when that line is crossed, reason retreats. When a gunfight nearly breaks out between Angel and the Gorches over dividing up the Starbuck booty, Pike comments, “go on, go for it, fall apart,” thereby attempting to invoke rationality and self-awareness to prevent bloodshed. It’s clear, though, that if a first shot in this scene had been fired, reason would have fled: this is precisely what happens after Mapache is gunned down. The Bunch kill the “general” on impulse as retaliation for Angel’s murder. As so often occurs in the film after a violent act (e.g., after Angel shoots Teresa), there’s a significant pause as the film’s action hangs in the balance. Following Mapache’s death, Pike slowly pivots, waits a second, looks at Mohr, takes careful aim, and then fires, shooting Mohr through the head. After that point (with one rare exception

to which I'll draw attention later), people aren't acting, they're reacting.

Yet Peckinpah also makes us aware that even these violent men can become so in awe of violence's destructive potential that they are themselves given to pauses of surprise. I have already drawn attention to the point in the Starbuck massacre when Thornton draws a bead on Pike. Thornton waits for a second, not only reacting slowly because of his age but also apparently considering what he is about to do. That momentary hesitation allows for the intervention of the tuba player, which makes it possible for Pike to fire and escape. Harrigan is aware of the mistake that Thornton has made by being too thoughtful. "Why didn't you shoot Pike when you had the chance?" he asks Thornton. Thornton, though, doesn't answer, not wanting to admit either to his slowness (he is an old man, asleep when we first see him) or to his contemplative, virtually brooding nature (the pose that he strikes when he leans back against Agua Verde's wall at the film's end is quite similar to that of Pike in Angel's village sitting under a tree and thinking).²⁰

Toward the end of the train heist sequence, there's another noteworthy frozen moment. The fuse on the bridge has been lit; Pike and the Bunch are on the Mexican side of the border, looking back. Once again, Thornton and Pike regard each other across a physical distance that symbolizes their psychological alienation. As he did in Starbuck, Thornton raises his rifle to shoot Pike; Pike, counting on the inevitability of the dynamite explosion, tips his hat to Thornton in a gesture compounded of both respect and taunting bravado. When the bridge explodes, with horses and riders thrown into the water, Peckinpah shows us Pike's astounded reaction: Pike is shaken by the ferocity of the blast, which he doubtless feels in both a physical sense (the shock wave) and a psychological one (resulting from the impressiveness of the force that is unleashed). For a moment, though, Pike can only stare at the destruction he has wrought. Just as he does in the middle of the Agua Verde massacre when he realizes that his men are being shot to pieces (he sees both of the Gorches hit with bullets within a few seconds), this man of violent action is temporarily rendered in-

ert. Given these instances' dramatization of contemplative hesitation, with the nature of and reactions to violence being repeatedly dissected and investigated, it's difficult to avoid concluding that the film in which the Bunch and other violent characters appear is neither a celebration nor a glorification of violence but an inquiry into its limitations and the manner in which it operates.

Mexican cultural attitudes toward violence also not only seem to form the basis for a significant amount of the film's near-the-border action but also throw into relief the attitudes evidenced by the Bunch. As Christina Jacqueline-Johns points out in *The Origins of Violence in Mexican Society*, much of the violence in Mexican society is a result of influences from both the Aztec civilization and the Spanish, the latter of whom conquered Mexico in the sixteenth century. Jacqueline-Johns attributes this violence to the impulse to acquire new land and enslave the population, attitudes that she views as extensions of the movement toward capitalism in sixteenth-century Europe:

Sometime around the 14th century, [economic] expansion reached its limit and what had expanded began to contract. Population at the time began to reach a saturation point given the state of technology, and food shortages and epidemics were the result . . . the only way out of the stagnation was to expand the economic pie to be shared. What was needed and what capitalism offered was a new and more lucrative form of surplus appropriation, [one that moved beyond the tenets of feudalism with its] "direct appropriation of agricultural surplus in the form of either tribute . . . or of feudal rents."²¹

As a result, to get the valuable minerals out of Mexico's ground, the population was enslaved:

This process of reorganization [of Mexican society was] especially violent. The history of Conquest Mexico, the first thirty years of Spanish colonial presence . . . was largely the history of a forced change in the labor process . . . in this period of transition, organized violence served to transform the relationship of classes to one another and to the means of production.²²



FIGURE 22

The bounty hunters quarrel over their spoils after the shootout in San Rafael. Much of the film's violence occurs in contexts geared to capitalist expansion.

When we apply these insights to *The Wild Bunch*, it seems clear that the overwhelming majority of its violence occurs in the context of actions geared to capitalist acquisition. The ambush in Starbuck is set up by a railroad man trying to thwart a robbery against his company and intending to capture men who have stolen from the company before and who have a sizable bounty on their heads; the train heist is carried out on behalf of a man involved in a movement to maintain a repressive military-economic hold on the Mexican government; the first argument that we see among the Bunch concerns money; as previously noted, the Bunch (as well as Mapache) regard women as property; and the final shootout results from the Bunch's disgust with these alienating attitudes and their inability to find a means of countering them.

Predominantly, the film's violence is capitalist violence. For the

Bunch, the past that dominates their present is an economically influenced one. In the violent, regrettable actions of the Bunch, men whose pasts have been a series of one mistake after another, what we witness is nothing less than a dramatization of the history of the United States itself, whose past and present are riddled with treaties ignored, promises broken, agreements unmet. Jim Kitses is thus quite right when he observes, "*The Wild Bunch* is America."²³ Or, as Jacqueline-Johns puts it, "there [is] no way to sensibly extract 'criminal' violence from the more systematic violence that pervade[s] Mexican life, or that violence from the social and historical context in which it occurred, without reducing its meaning beyond sense. Criminal violence was Mexican violence, and Mexican violence was the violence of Mexico's history, its past reproduced in its present."²⁴ This is just as true for the film's American characters as it is for its Mexican ones. The history of this country is steeped in violence: the carnage of the 1776 revolution; the brutal campaigns against Native Americans; the massive deaths incurred during the war between the states; the Vietnam War; the church burnings, assassinations, and civil unrest that continue up to today. At all times, we are haunted by this country's violence-ridden past and weighed down by its murderous and abusive present. Similarly, the present violence of the Bunch is a function of *their* past, which repeatedly encloses them in an insular, and dangerous, life characterized by murder rather than peace, chaos rather than bonding, abandonment rather than commitment. Limited in sensitivity, intelligence, or foresight, these men can define themselves only through barbarous group behavior or extreme forms of diversion.

Inquiring into the nature of the relation between the Bunch's emotional shortcomings and the economic system to which they so often seem bound brings up one of the basic questions raised by the film: is the essential nature of human beings cooperative or selfish? In his book *The Art of Loving*, Erich Fromm observes, "if love is a capacity of the mature, productive character, it follows that the capacity to love in an individual living in any given culture depends on the influence this culture has on the average

person."²⁵ Fromm makes reference to Sigmund Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*, which disparages Marxian economics by asserting that its underlying assumption about the desire of humans to act cooperatively is at variance with observable human nature, which Freud conceives of in terms of aggression and self-interest.²⁶ Fromm, however, demonstrates that Freud's hypothesis was really nothing more than the unwitting extension of capitalist materialism to the field of human relations:

The second factor determining Freud's theories lies in the prevailing concept of man, which is based on the structure of capitalism. . . . Freud was largely influenced in his thinking by the type of materialism prevalent in the nineteenth century . . . he did not see that the basic reality lies in the totality of human existence . . . in the practice of life determined by the specific structure of society.²⁷

Extrapolating from this quote allows us to see that although *The Wild Bunch* never resolves the issue of human beings' fundamental nature, the film nonetheless functions as a critique of the society that made the Bunch what they are: a group of men unable to penetrate their socialized responses to the ultimate truth – that they are tragically representative of the predominantly anomic society in which they live. Bitter, unloved, wanted only for the money that their "pelts" will bring, they wander without purpose, lost in the capitalist wasteland of a film that at its end tries to romanticize them but that, overwhelmingly, exposes them as pathetic emotional wastrels. In the Bunch's failure to reach self-awareness, we see the failure of contemporary capitalist America, an anhedonic culture that has lost the ability to do anything notable except wage war and experience pain.

One of *The Wild Bunch's* major ironies is that at its apotheosizing end, its intended emotional effect (to make us miss the Bunch) and its subtext (which reveals them as pitiable men) wildly diverge, almost in the manner of some sort of hysterical confusion.²⁸ The film tries to move away from a feeling of capitalist ennui, but it cannot. All of the talk about Starbuck "silver," about the ten thou-

sand dollars in gold that Mapache offers, about the payrolls to be delivered to garrisons, about the prices on the heads of the Bunch, even the apparently idealistic gesture of giving Angel guns (Pike requires Angel to give up his share of the gold for them), are linked to and sullied by this fateful corruption. Ultimately, the film collapses back into a wistful reminiscence for men whose badness is not a function of their physical violence so much as the violence that they do to their ideas of their past selves, as men who at one time had hope for a life different from the ones they finally lived. *The Wild Bunch's* emphasis on claustrophobic despair occurs for the final time out in the open, in the dusty stretch of land outside of Agua Verde's gate, where, despite the reinvoked images of a laughing Bunch, we come to the grim realization that in more ways than one, and long before the film's end, these bad men have really (in Peckinpah's words) reached "the end of the line."²⁹

NOTES

- 1 To the best of my knowledge, the only essay that relates *The Wild Bunch's* use of filmic space to larger contextual issues is Leonard Engel's "Space and Enclosure in Cooper and Peckinpah: Regeneration in the Open Spaces," *Journal of American Culture* 14:(2) (Summer 1991), pp. 86–93. Unfortunately, Engel tends to refrain from investigating the manner in which Peckinpah uses space allusively in the film.
- 2 Although I am somewhat hesitant to ascribe biographical significance to this aspect of the film, we are to a degree encouraged in this direction by the similarity between Peckinpah's personal behavior and that of the film's violent characters. It is well known that Peckinpah was prone to violent outbursts, which were often prompted and exacerbated by his drinking (even David Weddle's tasteful biography of Peckinpah is compelled to return to this fact repeatedly). While we can't assert that drinking *causes* violence, it is certainly true that drinking lowers one's tolerance for it. Even when, as with the children at the film's beginning, drinking is not allied with violent action, we can nonetheless posit a further connection between alcohol and violence if we regard violence as an intoxicant, a form of behavior that exerts a powerful, virtually physical pull on those involved with it as a result of its potential for excitation. A whole other essay could be written on the function of alcohol in Peckinpah's films.

- 3 Perhaps Peckinpah is here suggesting that his own perspective, like that of any artist re-creating past events, is narrow or foreshortened – that he must, by necessity, employ allusion and metonymy, communicating the flavor of life through disparate events; that he is, in essence, somewhat like his protagonists, who often seem at a strange remove from events. (Indeed, the slow-motion violence in the film suggests just this kind of distancing effect, signaling our simultaneous attraction to and repulsion by acts of brutality.)
- 4 Sam Peckinpah quoted in David Weddle, *"If They Move . . . Kill 'Em!": The Life and Times of Sam Peckinpah* (New York: Grove Press, 1994), p. 334.
- 5 See, e.g., Ray Allen Billington, ed., *The Frontier Thesis: Valid Interpretation of American History?* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966).
- 6 Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," in *Frontier and Section: Selected Essays of Frederick Jackson Turner* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1961), p. 38.
- 7 *Ibid.*, pp. 49–50.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 56.
- 9 Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 65.
- 10 Turner, p. 58.
- 11 One of the major ironies in the film, of course, is that the Bunch are not free in either the United States or Mexico.
- 12 Konrad Lorenz, *On Aggression* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1966), pp. 35–6.
- 13 *Ibid.*, pp. 38–9.
- 14 Yet once the Bunch are in the village, a certain amount of this rivalry disappears: the Gorches playfully tag after Angel's sister, with no apparent thought of claiming her; Pike lets his female companion dance with Dutch (although the woman looks to Pike for permission before she does so); and Sykes steals what he refers to as "[Dutch's] gal" away from Dutch, although he does so playfully.
- 15 Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1970), p. 5.
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 35.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 53.
- 19 *Ibid.*, pp. 54–6.
- 20 Paul Seydor has pointed out to me an interesting (and, in my view, virtually reciprocal) reaction on Pike's part. After the tuba player is hit, Pike turns and looks back at Thornton. Although he has a clear

shot at his former friend, Pike instead chooses to fire at, and wound, the man to Thornton's right. Neither Thornton nor Pike seems willing to kill the other; introspective men to the end, they are too strongly joined in memories (as in the duplicate flashback ruminations they undergo regarding Thornton's capture by the Pinkerton men) and desires (both want deliverance from their former lifestyles) to really wish the other dead.

- 21 Christina Jacqueline-Johns, *The Origins of Violence in Mexican Society* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger Publishers, 1995), p. 111. The quote within Jacqueline-Johns's citation is from Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World System* (New York and London: Academic Press, 1974), p. 38.
- 22 Ibid., p. 131.
- 23 Jim Kitses, "The Wild Bunch," in Michael Bliss, ed., *Doing It Right: The Best Criticism on Sam Peckinpah's The Wild Bunch* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1994), p. 79.
- 24 Jacqueline-Johns, pp. xi-xii.
- 25 Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1962), p. 83.
- 26 Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. and ed. by James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton Co., 1961), pp. 60-1.
- 27 Fromm, pp. 91-2.
- 28 The term is loosely derived from Geoffrey Nowell-Smith's essay on Vincente Minnelli, "Minnelli and Melodrama," which appears in Christina Gledhill, ed., *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film* (London: BFI Books, 1987), pp. 70-4.
- 29 Sam Peckinpah quoted by Stephen Farber in "Peckinpah's Return," *Film Quarterly*, 23 (1) (Fall 1969), p. 9.

4 Ballistic Balletics: Styles of Violent Representation in *The Wild Bunch* and After

Displays of armed violence in American cinema go back at least to Edwin S. Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), with its multiple gunfights and its sensational concluding image of a bandit firing his revolver directly into the camera lens. This seeming assault on the audience, which contained the "special effect" of hand-tinted orange-yellow gunsmoke in contemporary prints, marked the beginning of an uneasy relationship between spectators and on-screen gunplay that has been tempered by the cultural/political status of real armed violence in American society at any given point in time and quite obviously persists today. Historically dependent on the current state of motion picture technology and prevailing mechanisms of content censorship, the relationship was aggravated to the point of rupture during the late 1960s when two films broke the bounds of conventional representation to become flashpoints in a heated national debate over gun violence. Produced in the climate of rebellion that followed the assassination of President John Kennedy and President Lyndon Johnson's precipitous escalation of the Vietnam War, Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (1969) bracketed the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy and the worst urban riots in the country's

history. Both films combined the use of slow motion with blood-filled squibs (explosive devices concealed beneath an actor's clothing and triggered electronically to represent bullet strikes) to depict the impact of bullets on the human body – enhanced, in *The Wild Bunch*, by spurting arterial blood and gaping exit wounds – setting a new standard for ballistic violence on screen that clearly echoed the real-world context of political assassination, ghetto uprisings, and Vietnam.

Yet the history of the representation of gunplay in American films, especially since World War II, had led logically to this conclusion. Most closely associated with the Western and the gangster film (genres proceeding from *The Great Train Robbery* and D. W. Griffith's *The Musketeers of Pig Alley* [1912], respectively), but also endemic to the combat, detective, and espionage film, gun violence in the teens and twenties was often depicted by the real thing. According to John Baxter, a rifleman or sharpshooter was a standard member of any Western film crew during this era, although more cautious directors used slingshots firing marbles or pieces of chalk to simulate gunshots, whisking off their actors' hats with black threads.¹ For gunshot wounds themselves, ink-soaked plugs of sponge rubber were fired from a starting pistol, as at the conclusion of Howard Hughes's *Hell's Angels* (1930) when Ben Lyon is shot at close range in the back. Such methods produced reasonably credible results until the coming of sound added a new dimension of realism to film that demanded a visual counterpart. Machine-gun sprays with live ammunition achieved this effect in such gangster films as *Taxi!* (Roy Del Ruth, 1932) and *G-Men* (William Keighley, 1935), until they were replaced by sophisticated process screen photography in the late 1930s.² At about the same time, the invention of a blood-filled gelatin capsule solid enough to be fired from a compressed air rifle but soft enough to explode on impact promised new realism in the depiction of wounds. In the late sixties, these capsules, augmented by the "squib" – a tiny shaped charge detonated by wire to simulate the impact of a bullet without firing any projectile at the actor or stunt man³ – would produce the spurting wounds of *Bonnie and Clyde* and *The Wild Bunch*,



FIGURE 23

With bullet hits visible on his body, a businessman is shot dead in Peckinpah's *The Getaway* (1972).

but in the early years of sound, cultural factors arose to ensure that the level of violence in American cinema would be kept well within socially decorous limits for decades to come.

In the period 1929–32, the Payne Fund Studies had been undertaken by nationally known researchers to determine the influence of motion pictures on children, and the conclusions – popularly summarized by Henry James Forman in his 1933 volume *Our Movie Made Children* – suggested that the influence was both broad and pernicious.⁴ Almost simultaneously, the advent of sound had produced a wave of grim, and often brutal, screen realism that was typified by a trio of gangster films – *Little Caesar* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1930), *The Public Enemy* (William Wellman, 1931), and *Scarface* (Howard Hawks, 1932) – that provoked censorship battles with the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA)

and many state licensing boards.⁵ The public outcry against such violent early sound films, as well as against those thought to be lewd and libidinous, produced the threat of a nationwide boycott by the Catholic Church in April 1934. The ultimate result was the MPPDA's imposition of the Production Code. Best known today for its proscription of sexuality, the Code's most elaborate strictures were reserved for the depiction of crime. It was forbidden to show the details of a crime or to display machine guns, submachine guns, or other illegal weapons; it was further forbidden to discuss these weapons in dialogue scenes or even to represent the sound of their repercussions off-screen. (Gangster films like *Scarface* had made a positive fetish of the sound and image of the recently invented Thompson submachine gun; that film contains a spectacular drive-by Thompson attack on a speakeasy violent and *loud* enough to have been shot forty years later.) The Code also required that law enforcement officers never be shown dying at the hands of criminals and that all criminal activities within a given film be punished.⁶ Under no circumstances was crime to be justified; suicide and murder were to be avoided unless absolutely necessary to the plot; and the suggestion of excessive brutality or wholesale slaughter of any kind was absolutely prohibited because, as a 1938 amendment to the Code put it, "frequent presentations of murder tend to lessen regard for the sacredness of life."⁷ Members of the MPPDA agreed not to distribute any film denied the Production Code Administration's (PCA) Seal of Approval or, by extension, to book such films into any of the nation's first-run theater chains, nearly all of which they owned.

During America's participation in World War II, the antiviolence strictures of the Code were relaxed (as, to a lesser extent, were the moral ones) for reasons of state. It became important for combat and espionage films to have the hard edge of documentary realism, especially as the war deepened in 1943 and 1944, and for propaganda films to show a formidably brutal enemy. Nazi and Japanese barbarism was on full display in such sensational films as *Hitler's Children* (Edward Dmytryk, 1943), *Hitler's Madman* (Douglas Sirk, 1943), *None Shall Escape* (Andre de Toth, 1944), *Behind the Rising*

Sun (Edward Dmytryk, 1943), and *Blood on the Sun* (Frank Lloyd, 1945), which contained scenes of mass execution, rape, and torture (including blinding, crucifixion, and the bayonetting of children), not shown directly on screen but clearly implied. Newsreels and documentaries from the Army Signal Corps lingered over piles of enemy corpses and exploited a taste for violent revenge (e.g., advertising copy for *With the Marines at Tarawa* [March 1944] encouraged the viewer to see “the real thing at last – no punches pulled, no gory details omitted”).⁸ By the war’s end, the American public had seen an unprecedented array of debased human behavior on screen. Although the PCA never lost its grip on feature film content, there was unquestionably a coarsening of audience taste during the war, a desensitization to death and dying, after which it was difficult to retrench in peacetime.

As a result, the postwar period saw an injection of violence into almost every action genre – especially the Western and the film noir. Starting with *Duel in the Sun* (King Vidor, 1947) and *Ramrod* (Andre de Toth, 1947) and proceeding through *Yellow Sky* (William Wellman, 1948), *Blood on the Moon* (Robert Wise, 1948), *Red River* (Howard Hawks, 1949) and *The Furies* (Anthony Mann, 1950), psychological motivation in the Western became more tangled and the violence more specific.⁹ *Film noir*, whose prototype was Billy Wilder’s corrosive *Double Indemnity* (1944), became the genre of postwar pessimism par excellence. With their downbeat atmosphere, dark lighting, and antitraditional cinematography, films like *The Blue Dahlia* (George Marshall, 1946), *Out of the Past* (Jacques Tourneur, 1947), *Dark Passage* (Delmer Daves, 1947), *Dead Reckoning* (John Cromwell, 1947), *Raw Deal* (Anthony Mann, 1948), *Criss Cross* (Robert Siodmak, 1949), *They Live By Night* (Nicholas Ray, 1949), *D.O.A.* (Rudolph Mate, 1949), and *White Heat* (Raoul Walsh, 1949) were urban crime melodramas in which violence assumed the status of an existential act. Shootings, beatings, and stabbings become normative behavior in a world where corruption cuts across all moral categories, and the violence in film noir was both more excessive than in earlier crime films and more intense.¹⁰

Speaking specifically of the postwar Western, Lawrence Alloway characterized the whole postwar aesthetic when he wrote that “violence is calibrated with a new precision” and enlarges the “pattern of behaviour tolerated within the form.”¹¹ Abetting this process was the crippling of the studio system through the “Paramount decrees” of 1948, which forced the major studios to divest themselves of exhibition over the next five years and relinquish their control of the American market. This caused a steady rise in independent production and a weakening of Production Code authority since filmmakers could now book their work into theaters without the PCA seal.¹² Legal challenges were also being mounted to the Code, including one resulting in the *Miracle* decision of 1952, which extended First and Fourteenth Amendment protection to motion pictures for the first time since 1915.¹³ Thus, by the mid-fifties, it was possible to see mainstream films noir in which a police officer’s wife and son are blown to smithereens in the family car and a gangster’s moll is facially disfigured by a cup of boiling coffee (*The Big Heat* [Fritz Lang, 1953]), or a young woman is tied to a bed and tortured to death with pliers off-screen while a private eye is pistol-whipped to a bloody pulp (*Kiss Me Deadly* [Robert Aldrich, 1955]). In the realm of the Western, a group of films appeared in the early fifties treating the the social impact of new weapons technologies on the frontier. Without actually violating the Code’s strictures against the display of illegal weapons, films like *Winchester 73* (Anthony Mann, 1950), *Colt .45* (Edwin L. Marin, 1950), *Only the Valiant* (Gordon Douglas, 1951), *Across the Wide Missouri* (William Wellman, 1951), and *The Siege at Red River* (Rudolph Mate, 1954) fetishized such legal automatic weapons as repeating rifles and the Gatling gun. Alloway notes that there was a general increase in technical/operational information in these “weapon Westerns,” speculating that this new emphasis may have addressed the large percentage of World War II and Korean War veterans in the domestic audience or may have bled over from pervasive discussions of Cold War armaments in contemporary news media.¹⁴ Whatever the case, the cycle extended through the decade with such films as *Man Without a Star*

(King Vidor, 1955), *The Young Guns* (Albert Band, 1956), *The Tin Star* (Anthony Mann, 1957), *Gunman's Walk* (Phil Karlson, 1958), and *Saddle the Wind* (Robert Parrish, 1958) – by which time the Production Code, rewritten in 1956 to eliminate all remaining taboos but those against nudity, sexual perversion, and venereal disease, had become nearly irrelevant. Standards for the depiction of violence on screen would henceforth depend more on what filmmakers created and the public would tolerate than on what industry self-censorship prescribed.

Concurrently, another trend resulting from divestiture – run-away production – had reached its height. This was the practice of American companies making films abroad to capitalize on cheaper labor and other lower costs. Italy, Spain, and later Yugoslavia were often used as locations for the expensive widescreen epics of the fifties and early sixties, and there was a good deal of industry cross-fertilization between Hollywood and Europe as a result. The Italians began producing “sword and sandal” or “peplum” epics (named for a typical garment worn in ancient times) with the *Hercules* (1958–65), *Maciste* (1959–65), and *Ursus* series (1960–2), and as early as 1961 the Cinecitta Studios started making American-style Westerns with expatriate “B” stars like Richard Basehart, Rod Cameron, and Edmund Purdom. These genre knock-offs, which came to be known as “spaghetti Westerns,” were strongly influenced by two American Westerns set in Mexico and directed by Robert Aldrich – *Vera Cruz* (1954) and *The Last Sunset* (1961) – the former through its theme of American mercenaries involved in a foreign revolution and the latter through its elaborate stylization of genre conventions and iconography.¹⁵ During 1961 and 1962, Aldrich himself was in Italy to make the biblical epic *Sodom and Gomorrah* (1962), and hired as his assistant director a young peplum veteran named Sergio Leone (1929–89), who also supervised a more sexually explicit Italian version of the film. The following year, Leone directed the sine qua non of spaghetti Westerns, *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964), which he adapted from Akira Kurosawa's samurai film *Yojimbo* (1961) nearly shot for shot. Casting Clint Eastwood (then costar of the CBS television series *Rawhide*) as a

nameless bounty hunter who cynically manipulates a feud between two warring clans, Leone shaped the features of the classical Italo-Western – baroque framings, a stretching of time through both long takes and montage, an electronically synthesized score (here, by Ennio Morricone), a Latinate cast and Mexican setting, and an emphasis on sudden and shocking violence. (In the explicitness of its swordfights, *Yojimbo* itself had upped the ante on gore in the samurai film.)¹⁶ *A Fistful of Dollars* was a box-office smash on both sides of the Atlantic, and Leone followed with the equally successful sequels *For a Few Dollars More* (1965) and *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (1966), creating a boom in spaghetti Westerns on a global scale. Whereas only 25 such films had been made before 1964, over 300 were produced in Italy between 1965 and 1969, with 66 in the peak year of 1966–7 alone.¹⁷ Artful, nihilistic, and extremely bloody, Leone's *Dollars* series with Eastwood and Sergio Corbucci's *Django* films,¹⁸ with Franco Nero, were both widely popular in the United States and upped the ante on what was acceptable in the realm of violent representation on American screens.

The American response was to match the Italians with Westerns like *Duel at Diablo* (Ralph Nelson, 1966), *Hang 'Em High* (1967, nominally directed by Ted Post but largely the creation of its star, Clint Eastwood), and *A Time for Killing/The Long Ride Home* (Phil Karlson, 1967), which contained multiple cold-blooded shootings, as well as scenes of torture and rape. This was possible because the MPAA had further revised the Production Code in September 1966 to eliminate specifically proscribed behavior and to offer instead a list of ten general guidelines (e.g., "Detailed and protracted acts of brutality, cruelty, physical violence, torture and abuse, shall not be presented").¹⁹ These were to be applied contextually, relative to a film's plot, and a provision was made for borderline cases to be released with a "Suggested for Mature Audiences" designation, opening the door to the classification and ratings system that would succeed the Code in 1968. The 1966 revisions left filmmakers considerable creative leeway in the depiction of violence, where justified by the plot, but stylistically the *representation* of

violence remained tied to the stage conventions from which it had emerged in the early silent period. In fact, for all of their graphic letting of stage blood and piling up of corpses, when it came to showing actual gunshot wounds, the spaghetti Westerns and their American clones were remarkably old-fashioned: however riddled with bullets a character might be, and at whatever range, there was little or no representation of entry and exit wounds. Typically, shots containing the actual moment of impact are quickly cut away from to conceal their lack of verisimilitude, or a stunt fall removes the wound site itself from our field of vision. As late as mid-1967, then, American films that contemporary critics could describe as "brutally realistic"²⁰ were refusing to represent the physiological effects of violence by suppressing the clinical pathology of gunshots and other wounds.

That the impact of bullets was consistently understated in these films stemmed both from the lingering presence of the Code and from a lack of imagination on the part of filmmakers themselves. Their failure to move beyond nineteenth-century stage conventions of realism in this area is not surprising given the inherent conservatism of the American industry with regard to style. Formally, in fact, most Hollywood films of the 1960s resembled their studio-era predecessors in every way but their widescreen aspect ratio and color. In other parts of the world, however, stylistic variety in the representation of violence was less rare. In Japan, for example, Akira Kurosawa practiced the intercutting of footage shot at different camera speeds to represent violent action in his epic *Seven Samurai* (1954), which was widely seen in the West after winning the Silver Lion at Venice and an Oscar for Best Foreign Film. (Appropriately, *Seven Samurai* was remade by Hollywood as a Western, *The Magnificent Seven* [John Sturges, 1960], but without Kurosawa's use of multiple cameras and dynamic montage; and, as noted earlier, Kurosawa's later samurai film *Yojimbo* [1961] was remade in Italy as *A Fistful of Dollars* [1964], the first spaghetti Western.)

Kurosawa's intercutting of normal and slow-motion footage in the battle sequences of *Seven Samurai* was innovative but not

unique. Slow motion, achieved by overcranking the camera and projecting the film at normal speed, had long been the province of the avant-garde (e.g. Dziga Vertov's *Kino-glaz* [1924]) and documentary cinema (Leni Riefenstahl's *Olympiad* [1936]) but was used occasionally in narrative film to achieve some expressive effect (e.g., the pillow fight sequence in *Zero du conduite* [Jean Vigo, 1934] or the dropping of the glass globe that signals Kane's death in *Citizen Kane* [Orson Welles, 1940]). Kurosawa himself intercut footage shot at different speeds as early as his first film, *Sanshiro Sugata* (1943), and continued the practice selectively in his samurai films of the fifties and sixties. In France, Henri George Clouzot experimented with slow-motion intercuts in both *Le Salaire de la peur* (*The Wages of Fear* [1953]) and *Les Diaboliques* (1955), influencing New Wave directors, who used slow-motion sequences to represent not only violence (e.g., Jean-Luc Godard in *Pierrot le fou* [1965]) but also romance (François Truffaut in *Jules et Jim* [1963]) and existential mystery (Alain Resnais in *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* [1961]). Borrowing from the New Wave, Lindsay Anderson brought slow-motion intercuts to British New Cinema in the rugby match that concludes *This Sporting Life* (1962) and the climactic shootout of *If . . .* (1968), where it was clearly intended to evoke *Zero de conduite*; and, in Spain, Welles shot slow-motion footage to depict the ghastliness of medieval warfare in the Battle of Shrewsbury sequence for *Chimes at Midnight* (1966). Hollywood remained largely resistant to such practices before Arthur Penn's groundbreaking *Bonnie and Clyde* was released by Warner Brothers in August 1967, although Penn himself had used slow motion to represent the fall of a wounded gunfighter in *The Left-Handed Gun* (1957) ten years before, and Peckinpah had shot the river battle that concludes *Major Dundee* (1965) with multiple cameras running at different speeds but stopped short of intercutting his slow-motion footage into the final print.²¹ In other American pre-*Bonnie and Clyde* examples, Sidney Lumet used slow motion for the flashback that opens *The Pawnbroker* (1965), John Derek for some brief action sequences in his World War II film *Once Before I Die* (1965), and John Boorman for several flashbacks in *Point Blank*

(1967), but no Hollywood filmmaker before Penn had used it to depict a shooting.

There was, however, a very prominent slow-motion shooting in the recent collective memory that had been seen on American television screens again and again: the murder of alleged presidential assassin Lee Harvey Oswald by Jack Ruby on November 24, 1963. NBC-TV cameras had caught this shooting live as it occurred at 12:21 Eastern Standard Time in the basement of Dallas police headquarters, but it was soon made available to all of the networks by videotape, and it was replayed over and over in slow motion so that viewers could follow the chaotic events of the murder and its aftermath. Throughout that Sunday afternoon and evening, the videotape replay of Oswald's shooting was intercut with live coverage of mourners filing past President Kennedy's flag-draped coffin as it lay in state in the Capitol rotunda. It was from their experience with the Oswald murder that network broadcasters conceived the idea of the "instant replay" for live sporting events. (Broadcast-standard videotape had been introduced by Ampex in 1957; unlike film, it could be replayed – and at variable speeds – as soon as it was shot.) Only five weeks later, on New Year's Eve 1963, it was used in a broadcast of the Army-Navy football game and by the end of 1964 had become a standard feature of televised sports. Indeed, Eric Barnouw credits slow-motion video replay with the rise of football to national prominence on network television by making it both accessible and pleasurable: "[B]rutal collisions became ballets, and end runs and forward passes became miracles of human coordination."²² Here it seems that the technology of videotape, soon to loom so large in bringing the Vietnam War into America's living rooms, preceded – and quite possibly influenced – film in expressing the poetics of violent action, organized or not.

According to a December 1967 interview with *Cahiers du Cinéma*, Arthur Penn conceived the "ballet of death" that concludes *Bonnie and Clyde* before he began shooting it,²³ and he later acknowledged the influence of Kurosawa.²⁴ In the process, he used four cameras running at different speeds (twenty-four, forty-eight,



FIGURE 24

The deaths of Bonnie and Clyde established a new level of graphic violence in modern cinema.

seventy-two, and ninety-six frames per second), each equipped with different lenses, and then intercut the footage into a twenty-two-second montage sequence representing the protagonists' agonized death by machine-gun fire. The actors (Faye Dunaway and Warren Beatty), heavily wired with explosive squibs and blood capsules, seem to be blown apart in slow motion, transferring a physical and emotional shock to the viewer that is both wrenching and strangely beautiful. The film, and this sequence in particular, generated a historic controversy over screen violence that was part of a larger ongoing debate about the looming presence of violence in national life. Penn clearly intended this, among other things, by having a piece of Clyde's head fly off, he said, "like that famous photograph of Kennedy"²⁵ – by which he meant the still frames from the Zapruder film published in the November

29, 1963, and November 25, 1966, issues of *Life* magazine.²⁶ (The American public did not have a chance to see the Zapruder film itself until it was shown on national television in 1975 [see note 25], by which point – after *Bonnie and Clyde*, *The Wild Bunch*, and their immediate successors – it must have seemed like a nightmare promise fulfilled.)

But Penn had also hit upon something deeper and more atavistic than an evocation of contemporary political violence, as he indicated in his *Cahiers* interview: “There’s a moment in death when the body no longer functions, when it becomes an object and has a certain kind of detached ugly beauty.”²⁷ This is the key to understanding the powerful attraction that the multiple-speed montage style identified here as “ballistic balletics” has for filmmakers and audiences alike. However socially responsible or irresponsible it may be in context, the slow-motion depiction of death by high-powered weapons fire is aesthetically pleasing. As the avant garde had understood for decades (and network television sportscasters had known since 1964), slow-motion photography offers one of the cinema’s great aesthetic pleasures. Combined with the thrill of pyrotechnic violence, it functions like an electrode implanted in the collective hippocampus. As proof, *Bonnie and Clyde* went on to become one of the most profitable films of 1967, earning by July 1968 nearly \$28 million in rentals worldwide on an investment of \$2.5 million.²⁸ Audiences liked the film for both its entertainment value and its social themes, but they were mesmerized by its conclusion, often sitting in stunned silence while the final credits rolled until the theater lights came up.²⁹ Many returned to see it again and again, making *Bonnie and Clyde* one of the first films to do significant repeat business. This was not lost on the new leadership team at Warner Bros. that had recently merged with Seven Arts Productions, Ltd., and would subsequently produce *The Wild Bunch*.

According to its special effects director, Danny Lee, *Bonnie and Clyde* was the first film to use synthetic blood capsules together with exploding squibs to simulate bullet strikes on the human body.³⁰ Squibs had recently been used to replicate the effects of

machine-gun fire in gangster films like *Party Girl* (Nicholas Ray, 1958) and *The St. Valentine's Day Massacre* (Roger Corman, 1967),³¹ where small explosive charges can be seen to splinter tables, chip walls, and (in the latter) puncture pipes and victims' overcoats during shootings; and artificial blood capsules had been used sparingly to create wounds since the late 1930s. In combining them, *Bonnie and Clyde* broke the last taboo against violent representation in American film. As Charles Champlin wrote in the *Los Angeles Times*, "Under the old [Production] Code, you would see somebody be shot but you never saw the body being torn apart. You didn't make the link."³² Now, all at once, violent death could be communicated as a nearly physical sensation in full anatomical detail. It was a revolution in perception that paralleled contemporaneous upheavals in American social life and in the film industry, where financial instability and conglomerate buyouts were creating a sense of uncertainty about the future. As Penn himself would later recall of the era: "What was happening at the time in Hollywood was that enormous power had devolved upon the directors because the studio system had kind of collapsed. We were really running it, so we could introduce this new perception of how to make another kind of movie."³³

Though Peckinpah claimed to have seen *Bonnie and Clyde* only after completing *The Wild Bunch*, several cast and crew members recall remarks to the contrary. (Dub Taylor, who had played C. W. Moss's father in Penn's film and the mayor of Starbuck in *The Wild Bunch*, remembers Peckinpah telling him during production, "It'll be better than *Bonnie and Clyde*";³⁴ and wardrobe supervisor Gordon Dawson recalls Peckinpah saying, "We're going to bury *Bonnie and Clyde*," before filming the opening massacre sequence.³⁵) Whatever the truth of Penn's influence, that of Kurosawa is indisputable: Peckinpah consistently cited *Rashomon* (1950) as his favorite film, and he told Ernest Callenbach after completing *Ride the High Country* (1962), "I'd like to be able to make a Western like Kurosawa makes Westerns."³⁶ The Kurosawa "Westerns" he might have seen at this point would have included *Seven Samurai* (1954), *The Hidden Fortress* (1958), *Yojimbo* (1961), and *Sanjuro* (1962), with

its famous “explosion of blood” in the climactic swordfight. There Kurosawa depicted his protagonist slashing into an opponent’s heart, producing a spectacular geyser of blood – actually carbonated chocolate syrup hidden in a pressurized container beneath the actor’s kimono³⁷ – which was probably the first on-screen arterial spray in the history of mainstream cinema. It seems likely that the slitting of Angel’s throat by Mapache in *The Wild Bunch* (which employs similar technology)³⁸ has its origins here, but whether Peckinpah saw *Sanjuro* or not, he was determined to show the visceral impact of high-powered weaponry in his own film to an extent that exceeded even *Bonnie and Clyde*. To this end, he experimented with larger squibs loaded with a mixture of blood and raw meat, and he ordered his actors squibbed both front and back to simulate a bullet’s complete trajectory through the body. (Al-

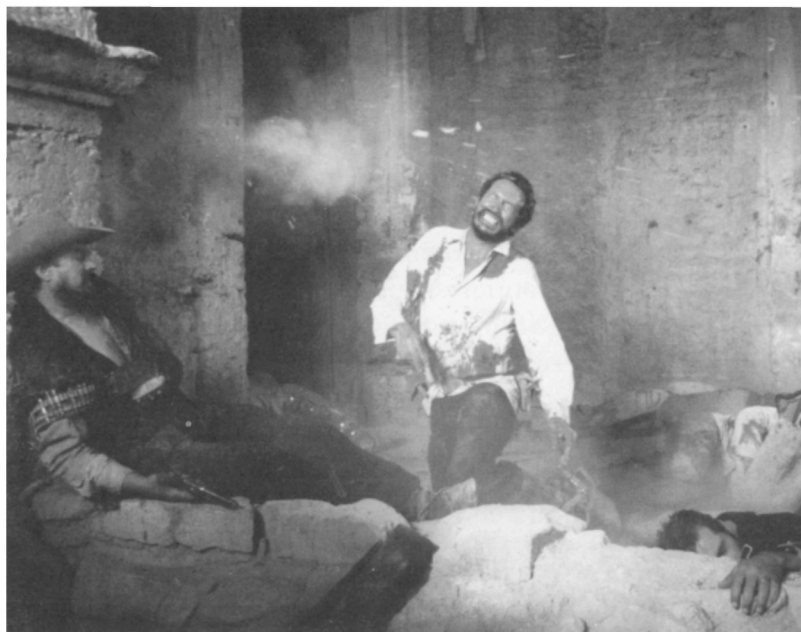


FIGURE 25

The violence of *The Wild Bunch* went well beyond the level of gore that *Bonnie and Clyde* had established in 1967.

though Penn had shown a piece of Clyde's skull flying off behind his head in the death montage, he had not squibbed either of his protagonists for exit wounds.) Peckinpah even wired concealed charges to his actors' stomachs so that they would receive a real slap of recoil when their bullet squibs exploded and would react physically to being "shot."³⁹ These techniques combined with Peckinpah's rapidly cut multiple-camera montage to produce the extreme stylization of the Starbuck and Agua Verde massacres, with their countless, seemingly endless slow-motion shots of blood and tissue exploding from flesh.

The "slow-motion leap," as Marshall Fine has called it,⁴⁰ represented a convergence of Peckinpah's own long-standing interest in slow motion with that of two collaborators – screenwriter Walon Green and editor Lou Lombardo. Green's original script for the film, adapted from a story by Peckinpah's friend Roy N. Sickner, called for all of its action sequences to be filmed in slow motion,⁴¹ an unthinkable practice for a mainstream Western in 1969 but one that had obvious appeal for the director of *Major Dundee*. Lou Lombardo, for his part, had never cut a feature before *The Wild Bunch* but had worked with Peckinpah as an assistant cameraman on his teleproduction of *Noon Wine* (ABC Stage 67, November 1966). He had since become an editor on several filmed television series, and Peckinpah convinced Warner Bros. to hire him after seeing a slow-motion death sequence Lombardo had put together for an episode of *Felony Squad* months before *Bonnie and Clyde*. In it, footage of Joe Don Baker falling after being shot by police had been filmed at twenty-four frames per second but triple-printed optically at seventy-two frames per second.⁴² Lombardo then intercut the resulting slow-motion footage of Baker's fall with that of the cops firing on him at normal speed until he finally hit the ground. When Peckinpah and his producer, Phil Feldman, saw this sequence, they were reportedly ecstatic,⁴³ and it became the catalyst for shooting the film's gunfights at variable camera speeds and integrating the footage into extended montages of violent action. Ultimately, Peckinpah would film both the Starbuck and Agua Verde massacre/shoot-outs with six separate

cameras running at 24, 30, 60, 90, and 120 frames per second to achieve a wide range of speeds for subsequent intercutting, speeds that Lombardo could vary even more elaborately through optical printing. Of course, the concept of intercutting slow-motion with normal-speed action sequences was fundamental to the work of both Kurosawa and Penn, but neither had sought the precise temporal elasticity that informs violent death in *The Wild Bunch*. (It's worth noting, though, that other kinds of action are the subject of variable speed montage in the film; these include the long, tumbling fall of horses and men down a sand dune during the Bunch's flight into Mexico, the ramming of the cavalry troop car after the munitions train robbery, and the blowing up of the bridge across the Rio Grande with the bounty hunters in pursuit – none of which, amazingly, involve fatalities [at least, not on screen].)

The extreme violence of *The Wild Bunch* was facilitated during its production by the final dismantling of the Production Code and its replacement by a rating classification system. As chief industry spokesperson, Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) president Jack Valenti had for several years been promoting a new climate of creative freedom for filmmakers in response to the social revolutions so clearly taking place across the land. He had engineered the Code revisions of 1966 and later become an apologist for the new wave of movie violence represented by films like *The Dirty Dozen* (Robert Aldrich, 1967) and *Bonnie and Clyde*, which in a February 1968 press conference he shrewdly but accurately connected to the escalating war in Vietnam: "For the first time in the history of this country, people are exposed to instant coverage of a war in progress. When so many movie critics complain about violence on film, I don't think they realize the impact of thirty minutes on the Huntley–Brinkley newscast – and that's real violence."⁴⁴ Four months later, after Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy had been murdered on American soil, the national debate over film violence reached crisis proportions, and Valenti led the MPAA in taking self-protective action.⁴⁵ Between June and September, he worked with its nine member companies, the National Association of Theater Owners

(NATO), and the International Film Importers and Distributors of America (IFIDA) to craft a rating system on the British model that would respond to public anger over movie violence without reducing filmmakers' creative freedom (or the industry's huge new profits from graphic representations of sex and violence on screen). On October 7, 1968, Valenti announced the creation of the MPAA's new Code and Rating Administration (CARA), with its four classifications by audience category effective November 1 – G (general audience), M (mature audience – changed in 1972 to GP and then PG [parental guidance recommended]), R (restricted – persons under 16 [later 17] not admitted unless accompanied by a parent or guardian), and X (persons under 16 [later 17] not admitted). As Stephen Prince points out, adoption of the CARA system helped to institutionalize the radical shifts in film content that had followed the Code revision of 1966.⁴⁶ *Bonnie and Clyde* had pushed the limits of that revision, but *The Wild Bunch* would have broken them altogether and could not have been released with the PCA seal in its final form. The new ratings system, however, enabled its producers to negotiate an R rating downward from an X with most of its violence intact, ensuring that it would reach its target audience: the 17- to 25-year-old age group.

Although the style and level of its violence would influence several generations of directors, *The Wild Bunch* had no immediate imitators. *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (George Roy Hill, 1969) might look like a version of Peckinpah's film bowdlerized for Young Republicans, but in fact William Goldman's script predated that of *The Wild Bunch* by at least a year (Phil Feldman had read it in 1967 and unsuccessfully urged Warner Brothers production chief Ken Hyman to buy it),⁴⁷ and the two films were released just months apart. (There *is*, however, a suspiciously Peckinpah-like slow-motion sequence of Butch and the Kid shooting some Bolivian bandits near the end of the film that was filmed at four times normal speed.)⁴⁸ Penn followed *Bonnie and Clyde* with the nonviolent counterculture ballad *Alice's Restaurant* (1969); and although he used violence selectively in his films of the 1970s (e.g., *Little Big Man* – see note 48), he never again approached the

sheer visceral horror of *Bonnie and Clyde*'s "ballet of death." In fact, for all of its screen violence, the next decade featured few practitioners of "ballistic balletics" but Peckinpah himself. The multiple-camera, variable-speed montage effects of *The Wild Bunch* were repeated with suitable differences in the gunfire sequences of *Straw Dogs* (1971), *The Getaway* (1972), *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* (1973), *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia* (1974), *The Killer Elite* (1975), and *Cross of Iron* (1977) before they devolved into the self-parody of *Convoy* (1978) and entered standard industry practice in the 1980s. Outside of Peckinpah's work, there were only a handful of 1970s films that used exploding squib effects to represent gunshot wounds. These include Ralph Nelson's *Soldier Blue* (1970), where there are several close shots of bloody entry and exit wounds during the Sand Creek massacre sequence;⁴⁹ Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* (1972), when the character of Sonny Corleone (James Caan) is ambushed by rival gang members with machine guns at a highway tollbooth; and Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976), during Travis Bickle's (Robert De Niro) climactic shooting spree. For *The Godfather*, makeup artist Dick Smith invented the "mole," a squib concealed beneath a mock layer of skin, and rigged Caan with over 100 of them for detonation during the *Bonnie and Clyde*-style attack. *Taxi Driver*, for which Smith also designed makeup effects, used a combination of prosthetics and explosive squibs to show a man's hand blown off by a .44 magnum in a sequence of slaughter so gruesome that Scorsese had to diffuse the color in printing to avoid an X rating.

By the time of Peckinpah's last film, *The Osterman Weekend* (1983), it had become difficult to distinguish his ballistic montages from those of such mainstream action directors as Walter Hill (*The Warriors* [1979]; *The Long Riders* [1980]), Clint Eastwood (*Sudden Impact* [1983]), and George Pan Cosmatos (*Rambo: First Blood Part II* [1985]; *Cobra* [1986]), and slow-motion squib work had passed from innovation to conservative norm. By this time, too, the level of violence that had stirred public outrage in the late 1960s had become normative, if not actually acceptable, so that Charles Champlin could write with dark amusement of the climactic mas-



FIGURE 26

Ballistic montages and slow motion have become routine elements of contemporary action films. Sylvester Stallone in *Cobra*.

sacre in *Rambo*: “I tried a body count the other afternoon, but gave up after two dozen because there was no reliable way even to estimate how many fell to the bombs, rockets, and perpetual load automatic weapons. . . . I can’t believe the full toll is less than 100.”⁵⁰ The escalation of screen mayhem was a direct result of market forces unleashed in the post-CARA, post-*Wild Bunch* era as the enormous box-office power of “ultraviolence” was realized in the success of films like *A Clockwork Orange* (Stanley Kubrick, 1971),⁵¹ *Dirty Harry* (Don Siegel, 1971), *Magnum Force* (Ted Post, 1973), *Dillinger* (John Milius, 1973), *Walking Tall* (Phil Karlson, 1973), *Death Wish* (Michael Winner, 1974), *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, 1976), and *Marathon Man* (John Schlesinger, 1976), but above all *The Godfather*, whose blockbuster status as the fifth highest-grossing film of the decade (\$85.7 million domestically) conferred the mantle of industry respectability on eruptive bloodletting in a way that the paltry earnings of *The Wild Bunch* (\$7,503,192 domestic gross

for 1969)⁵² or even *Bonnie and Clyde* (about \$28 million through 1968 – see earlier) could not.

In 1987, self-proclaimed Peckinpah protégé Walter Hill would make *Extreme Prejudice*, a modern-day gloss on *The Wild Bunch*, whose conclusion reprises and updates the Agua Verde massacre with contemporary firepower. (More recent if less specific tributes to *The Wild Bunch* include *Point Break* [Kathryn Bigelow, 1991], *True Romance* [Tony Scott, 1993], and *Heat* [Michael Mann, 1995].) That same year, Stanley Kubrick used extreme slow-motion squib detonations to prolong the agony of the sniper ambush sequence of *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) – the first film named after a bullet casing rather than a weapon, as if to underscore the new obsession with ballistics. In the 1990s, the work of American directors like Quentin Tarantino (*Reservoir Dogs* [1992], *Pulp Fiction* [1994]), Roger Avary (*Killing Zoe* [1994]), Sam Raimi (*The Quick and the Dead* [1995]), and Dutch emigré Paul Verhoven (*Total Recall* [1990], *Basic Instinct* [1992]) makes a positive fetish of ballistic balletics, and Robert Rodriguez (*El Mariachi* [1992], *Desperado* [1995], *From Dusk to Dawn* [1996]) has become famous for choreographing gun battles as if they were dance numbers. In Hong Kong, John Woo (*The Killer* [1989], *Bullet in the Head* [1990], *Hardboiled* [1992]) and others created an entire subgenre of “gunplay” films around the ballistics of high-capacity automatic pistols by conscious analogy with *The Wild Bunch*, and Italian director Carlo Carlei explained of the shooting scenes in his *Flight of the Innocent* (1993), “There is a chain of inspiration like the Bible. . . . Everything comes from Peckinpah. . . .”⁵³ This is the sense in which footage from *The Wild Bunch* appears in the montage of violent images on Mickey and Malorie’s motel TV screen in Oliver Stone’s *Natural Born Killers* (1994), not as indictment but as history.

And yet, because it has become virtually impossible to see a killing in film or television that is *not* shot in graphic slow motion, we need to recall what this style meant in the context of its time nearly thirty years ago. Then, as Kathryn Bigelow recalls, it seemed “almost gestalt editing . . . [because] it imploded standard theories . . . and was radical and tremendously vibrant.”⁵⁴ It was

Hollywood cinema borrowing exultantly from both the avant-garde and from television in ways scarcely imaginable only years before, but doing so, paradoxically, to embody a terrible new knowledge of the pathology of gunshot wounds inflicted by five years of domestic political assassination and the war in Vietnam.

NOTES

- 1 John Baxter, *Stunt: The Story of the Great Movie Stunt Men* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, 1974), p. 180.
- 2 John Culhane, *Special Effects in the Movies: How They Do It* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1981), pp. 116–117.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 181.
- 4 David A. Cook, *A History of Narrative Film*, 3rd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), pp. 281–2.
- 5 Frank Miller, *Censored Hollywood: Sex, Sin, & Violence on Screen* (Atlanta: Turner Publishing, 1994), pp. 56–61.
- 6 Cook, p. 283.
- 7 Quoted in Jack Vizzard, *See No Evil: Life Inside a Hollywood Censor* (New York: Pocket Books, 1971), p. 313.
- 8 Quoted in Thomas Doherty, *Projections of War: Hollywood, American Culture, and World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 58.
- 9 Lawrence Alloway, *Violent America: The Movies 1946–1964* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1971), p. 54.
- 10 Writing of this trend in 1950, Manny Farber commented: “Hollywood has spawned, since 1946, a series of ugly melodramas featuring a cruel aesthetic, desperate craftsmanship, and a pessimistic outlook (“Films,” *The Nation*, October 28, 1950, p. 397).
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 54.
- 12 The test case for this was Otto Preminger’s *The Moon Is Blue*, released by United Artists without the PCA seal in 1953.
- 13 In 1950, *The State of New York v. The Miracle* attempted to prevent the exhibition of the Italian film *Il miracolo* (*The Miracle* [Roberto Rossellini, 1948]) on the grounds that it committed “sacrilege.” The case finally went to the U.S. Supreme Court, which in May 1952 ruled that “movies were a significant medium for communication of ideas” and therefore were entitled to a constitutional guarantee of free speech.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 39.
- 15 *The Last Sunset* became a cult film in Italy and was championed by the prestigious journal *Bianca e nero*.

- 16 Stephen Prince, *The Warrior's Camera: The Cinema of Akira Kurosawa* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 233.
- 17 According to Christopher Frayling in *Spaghetti Westerns: Cowboys and Europeans from Karl May to Sergio Leone* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), only about 20 percent of these were distributed internationally.
- 18 The "Django" character lasted through thirty films, only the first of which was actually directed by Corbucci. More bizarrely violent than Leone's work, *Django* was banned in several countries and produced in its immediate sequel, *Django Kill* (Guilio Questi, 1967), what Phil Hardy calls "the most brutally violent Spaghetti Western made" (*The Western* [New York: William Morrow, 1983], p. 302).
- 19 Quoted in Richard S. Randall, *Censorship and the Movies: The Social and Political Control of a Mass Medium* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1968), pp. 201ff.
- 20 Review of *Duel at Diablo* in *The New York Times*, October 16, 1966, p. E-6.
- 21 David Weddle, *"If They Move . . . Kill 'Em!": The Life and Time of Sam Peckinpah* (New York: Grove Press, 1994), pp. 243, 250.
- 22 Eric Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty: The Evolution of American Television*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 348.
- 23 Andre Labarthe and Jean-Louis Comolli, "The Arthur Penn Interview," rpt. in Sandra Wake and Micola Hayden, eds., *The Bonnie and Clyde Book* (London: Lorrimer, 1972), pp. 165–73.
- 24 Gary Crowdus and Richard Porton, "The Importance of a Singular, Guiding Vision: An Interview with Arthur Penn," *Cineaste*, 20,2 (Spring 1993): 9.
- 25 Labarthe and Comolli, p. 169.
- 26 The still frames appeared in "The Assassination of President Kennedy," *Life*, November 25, 1963, pp. 24ff., and "A Matter of Reasonable Doubt," *Life*, November 29, 1966, pp. 38–48. Time-Life Corporation paid Zapruder \$150,000 for his 8mm film of the assassination on November 25, 1963, and kept it under lock and key for twelve years, except when it was subpoenaed by Jim Garrison for the Clay Shaw trial in New Orleans in 1969, after which bootleg copies began to appear. However, the the first authorized public showing of the Zapruder film did not take place until November 10, 1974, in Boston, and the film was first shown on national television on March 6, 1975 (on ABC's *Goodnight America*, hosted by Geraldo Rivera), at which point *Life* sold the film back to the Zapruder family for \$1. It seems virtually impossible, therefore, that either Penn or Peckinpah had seen the Zapruder film as such while *Bonnie and Clyde* and *The Wild Bunch* were

in preparation. However, public awareness of the film as the crucial evidentiary basis of the Warren Commission's *Report* was very high in 1967 owing to media coverage of the Garrison investigation and the release of Emile de Antonio's film of Mark Lane's *Rush to Judgement* in January.

- 27 Labrathe and Comolli, pp. 62–63.
- 28 "Warren Beatty 'Bonnie' Share," *Variety*, August 7, 1968, p. 1.
- 29 Both this phenomenon and the film's repeat business are recounted in the *Time* magazine cover essay "The Shock of Freedom in Films," December 8, 1967, pp. 66ff. The author can verify both, having seen *Bonnie and Clyde* four times between October and December 1967 at theaters in the suburbs of Washington, D.C., with audiences stunned into immobility by the film's conclusion.
- 30 Culhane, pp. 120–1.
- 31 For the record, Corman's film and Penn's were released just weeks apart, in August and September 1967, respectively.
- 32 Quoted in Laurent Bouzereau, *Ultra Violent Movies: From Sam Peckinpah to Quentin Tarantino* (New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1996), p. 3.
- 33 Crowds and Porton, p. 12.
- 34 Quoted in Marshall Fine, *Bloody Sam: The Life and Films of Sam Peckinpah* (New York: Donald I. Fine, Inc., 1991), p. 124.
- 35 Quoted in Weddle, p. 331.
- 36 Ernest Callenbach, "A Conversation with Sam Peckinpah," *Film Quarterly* 17,(2) (Winter 1963–4): 10.
- 37 Donald Richie, *The Films of Akira Kurosawa*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press), p. 162.
- 38 According to Jaime Sanchez, who played Angel, a perforated, flesh-colored tube of pressurized stage blood was run across his throat, which burst open on contact with Emilio Fernandez's (Mapache) rubber knife (quoted in Weddie, p. 342). A side view of this action, showing the blood spurt, was eliminated from the final version to avoid an X rating (Fine, p. 144).
- 39 Weddle, p. 329.
- 40 Marshall Fine, *Bloody Sam: The Life and Films of Sam Peckinpah* (New York: Donald I. Fine, Inc. 1991), pp. 142–149.
- 41 *Ibid.*, pp. 144–5.
- 42 Garner Simmons, *Peckinpah: A Portrait in Montage* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), p. 85.
- 43 Lombardo, quoted in Weddle, p. 333.
- 44 "'Brutal Films Pale Before Televised Vietnam' – Valenti," *Variety*, February 21, 1968, p. 2.

- 45 Two 1969 Supreme Court decisions were also involved in the creation of the ratings system. In *Ginsberg v. New York*, the Court ruled that the government could protect minors from sexually explicit materials; in *Interstate Circuit v. Dallas*, the Court affirmed the basic constitutionality of local censorship ordinances. Together, the two decisions suggested that communities could establish their own censorship guidelines for minors, so the MPAA set out to beat them to it.
- 46 Stephen Prince, *Savage Cinema: Sam Peckinpah and the Rise of Ultraviolent Movies* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), pp. 12–27.
- 47 Weddle, p. 308.
- 48 According to George Roy Hill in the documentary *The Making of Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, the sequence was shot with both overcranked and undercranked cameras, with the intention of intercutting the resulting footage. But Hill felt that the fast-motion shots made the sequence too “balletic” and retained only the slow motion shots of the action in the final film. *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (released in October 1969) went into production on September 16, 1968, some three months after principal photography was completed for *The Wild Bunch* (released in June 1969), so it seems unlikely that Hill used Peckinpah as the source for his slow-motion violence, whose squib work is in any case nearly bloodless.
- 49 Arthur Penn’s *Little Big Man* (1970) also offered a version of the Sand Creek massacre, less gory than Nelson’s, that – surprisingly, perhaps – used only one exploding squib shot, without either spurting blood or slow-motion. Both *Soldier Blue* (released in August) and *Little Big Man* (released in December) intended a parallel between Sand Creek and the My Lai massacre of March 16, 1968, which had recently been revealed in the American press.
- 50 Quoted in Bouzereau, p. 158.
- 51 The term “ultraviolence” originated with Anthony Burgess’s novel *A Clockwork Orange* (1962) and was popularized by Kubrick’s brilliant adaptation of the book.
- 52 Weddle, p. 373.
- 53 Quoted in James Greenberg, “Western Canvas, Palette of Blood,” *The New York Times*, February 26, 1995, “Arts and Leisure” Section, p. 26.
- 54 Ibid.

5 Re-Visioning the Western: Code, Myth, and Genre in Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch*

The Wild Bunch was made just as the Western as a reliably profitable program staple was supposedly dying out after being the most dependably audience-satisfying structural format for more than seven decades. It is worth noting that despite evidence of the current “collapse” of the Western as a marketable commodity, there are still more Westerns in cinema history than any other Hollywood genre. Just as *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), *Stagecoach* (1939), and *High Noon* (1952) reconfigured the landscape of the American Western (and, in the case of *The Great Train Robbery*, helped to create it), Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* re-created the genre of the Western for the late 1960s. This film remains fresh and vital today because of the enormity of its revisionist enterprise. In its use of slow-motion photography to accentuate key moments of suspense and/or violence, in its creation of an entirely new set of character values for its protagonists (notably William Holden as Pike Bishop and Ernest Borgnine as Dutch Engstrom), and in its elegiac embrace of the “end of the old West,” *The Wild Bunch*, particularly in the extended director's cut (which I saw in a preview screening in 1969 as a writer for *Life* magazine and which is now readily available on home video), it constitutes a complete re-visioning and reconfiguration of classical Western

genre values in a way that sweepingly calls all previous examples of the genre into question.

It is also interesting that *The Wild Bunch* should appear at the same time as George Roy Hill's *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969), a film that offered a far more conventional and sentimental view of the West than *The Wild Bunch*, although it, too, culminated in a fatal shoot-out for the protagonists. There are moments of respite in *The Wild Bunch* (notably the idyllic stop-over in Angel's village, discussed later), but for the most part, *The Wild Bunch* is propelled forward through action and violence. Unlike *Butch Cassidy*, which can also be considered a "buddy" Western, the gang in *The Wild Bunch* is held together by greed and a cruel sense of humor that dictate their every move. Romantic interludes in *The Wild Bunch* are "paid affairs" with prostitutes; the film opens with a violent robbery gone wrong and then coalesces into one extended chase sequence for the rest of the film, with time out only for sleeping, fighting, or planning the gang's next illegal escapade. One could hardly imagine the song "Raindrops Keep Fallin' on My Head" being incorporated into Peckinpah's vision of the West, as it was in *Butch Cassidy*, as a prominent set piece in the film.

Unlike the romantic and leisurely world of *Butch Cassidy*, violence in *The Wild Bunch* is insistent and omnipresent, not episodic or sporadic. The cruelty and sadism of the film are everywhere apparent. *The Wild Bunch* presents a new sort of heroic figure to the audience, one that is prefigured only by the lone-wolf protagonists of 1940s American film noir: the hero as antihero, a loner and a violent misfit who seeks only to survive through the disruption and abrogation of the established rules of the existing social contract. Mirroring this interior state of continual destruction and renewal, the editing of *The Wild Bunch* is at once intensive and plastic yet nonintrusive; as David Cook notes, with 3,642 cut points, the film is one of the most intensively edited motion pictures ever produced.¹ The forced sentimentality of John Ford's "coded West" has been replaced by the rampant intensity of mob violence and individual ambition; Howard Hawks's "profession-



FIGURE 27

Violence in *The Wild Bunch* is insistent and omnipresent.

alism" has here been raised to a higher degree of personal accountability than in *El Dorado* (1967) or any other of Hawks's Westerns. What makes *The Wild Bunch* fresh today is the newness of its vision, the originality of its stylistic and thematic approach, and the matter-of-fact fatality of its foredoomed plot line.

Simultaneously, *The Wild Bunch* critiques and/or extends the thematic domain of the numerous B Westerns that presented a sometimes schematic yet more often multivalent vision of the American West for serial generic consumption. In addition to Ford, Hawks, and Fred Zinnemann, Peckinpah's vision can be traced to the works of such B-film craftsmen as Joseph Kane, Ray Nazarro, and Sam Newfield, as well as many others who labored in the field of the program Western. Working at the same time that Ford, Hawks, and other A-line directors were making larger-budgeted Westerns, Kane (working for Republic), Nazarro (for Columbia) and

Newfield (for PRC) were making a bizarre mixture of “singing Westerns” in the Roy Rogers/Gene Autry mold, alternating these modest, nonconfrontational films with such productions as Kane’s *Brimstone* (1949), Nazarro’s *Last Days of Boot Hill* (1947), and Newfield’s *Death Rides the Plains* (1943). Kane also directed numerous TV Westerns, such as *Bonanza*, *Cheyenne*, and *Laramie*. He even directed a 1941 remake of *The Great Train Robbery* as an homage to the film that began the entire cycle of American Westerns.

Newfield was undoubtedly the most prolific of these three genre craftsmen, directing no fewer than twenty-three Westerns in 1943 (he averaged twenty a year for more than two decades), for a career total of several hundred Western features. Indeed, Newfield was forced by PRC to adopt two directorial aliases to cover his tracks (Sherman Scott and Peter Stewart) simply because he made films so quickly and efficiently. Joseph Kane directed more than 100 Westerns, nearly all of them for Republic, before going over to television in the late 1950s (when Republic collapsed). Nazarro directed many of the B Westerns Columbia produced in the 1940s and also has more than 100 feature Westerns to his credit. Above all other considerations, these directors epitomized the code of professionalism in action that permeates the world of the Western as a genre; Kane’s and Nazarro’s average schedule was a six-day shoot, with budgets as low as \$20,000; Peckinpah would work under many of the same conditions in creating his early series Westerns for weekly television.

Often these program Westerns were unexpectedly subversive. In the post–World War II 1940s, Nazarro directed a curious series of psychological, twist-ending Westerns for Columbia that seemed to suggest that established gender roles in the West were no more solidified than in contemporary psychological thrillers; dutiful daughters are revealed to be pyromaniacal psychopaths, trusted sheriffs are revealed as hopelessly corrupt, and bounty hunters kill their prey in cold blood rather than capture them alive (*Throw a Saddle on a Star*, *Roaring Rangers*, *Terror Trail*, *Two-Fisted Stranger*, and *Heading West* [all 1946]). B Westerns offered creative freedom even as they operated within a zone of physical impoverishment;

as long as you got the film finished on time, you could pretty much do what you wanted. The best of the B Westerns inhabited a phantom zone of imagistic commerce, creating narratives that thrived on continual conflict, strictly observed codes of behavior, and unceasing violence. Lack of financing brought a lack of supervision and the freedom that came with it. We will see the pattern of relative creative freedom of the B American Western repeated in the ultra-low-budget spaghetti Westerns of the early 1960s. Change seldom happens at the top echelons of filmmaking; instead it starts in the trenches and works its way up into our collective spectatorial consciousness.

Thus, these directors (and many others like them during this era, such as Spencer Gordon Bennet, William Witney, and Lesley Selander) began working out, in the 1930s and 1940s, many of the themes that would later surface in the "adult Westerns" of the 1950s and 1960s: the corruption of authority, the uselessness of societal constructs in maintaining order, a questioning of the established code of ethics, the thin line between "civilization" and chaos, the uniform as an unreliable disguise (as in the opening robbery sequence of *The Wild Bunch*), and even (in Nazarro's films) the disguise of expected gender behavior as a mode of criminal operation. Growing up in Fresno, California, during the 1930s and 1940s, Peckinpah no doubt had the chance to see hundreds of program Westerns; indeed, much of his love for the genre may be traced to his recreational filmgoing during this period of his often undisciplined adolescence. Although he was probably not aware at the time of any particular directorial signature in any of the films he viewed, the combined *vision* of the B Western as a world of unrelenting violence and down-at-the-heels nihilism could not have failed to influence his later work.

Interviewed more than forty years later, director Joseph Kane revealed that he, in turn, admired Peckinpah's work, commenting in a 1973 interview that "I saw . . . *The Wild Bunch* [and Peckinpah's] *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* [1973]. They were pretty bloody. Good Westerns, but a bit too violent. That guy Peckinpah can really shoot Westerns."² Clearly, Peckinpah had numerous generic

and stylistic models to draw upon in his youth within the cinema, and of all the cinematic myths then being displayed at the local theater, that of the American Western was at once the most pervasive, the most varied (if only through the sheer number of films being produced by a wide variety of filmmakers), and the most adventurous, which certainly would have appealed to the young director-to-be. Indeed, Peckinpah was deeply in love with the Western genre from the beginning of his career, as his early credits within the industry indicated. Between 1955 and 1960, Peckinpah scripted and/or directed numerous episodes of various television Westerns, including *Gunsmoke*, *Pony Express*, *Tales of Wells Fargo*, *Tombstone Territory*, *Trackdown*, *Broken Arrow*, *Klondike*, *Zane Grey Theatre*, and *The Westerner*, as well as writing and directing one episode (*Mon Petite Chow*) of *Route 66*.

Most important, Peckinpah created the classic television Western series *The Rifleman* with writer/director Arnold Laven, directing and scripting several episodes of the show, before Peckinpah and Laven had a falling out over *The Rifleman's* target audience. Peckinpah wanted to move away from a muted version of the Western in favor of a more realistic vision, even within the context of the compromised world of series television – a not altogether unreasonable ambition, given the vitality and viciousness of such contemporary television series as *Shotgun Slade*, *Have Gun, Will Travel*, or *Wanted: Dead or Alive*. This is the quest Peckinpah would pursue during his ascent within the world of feature films, to bring to the screen a vision of the Western that had previously been only hinted at. Westerns weren't juvenile programming for Peckinpah; they were epic tales on the order of the Nibelungen saga, in which death, betrayal, violence, and treachery operated as the primary concerns of the narrative.

Working in series television, Peckinpah developed a lifelong respect for the crew members he worked with on a daily basis; this, too, would carry over into his relationships with key crew members on his theatrical features. Episodic TV is above all a grinding business, in which deadlines simply *must* be met, because the air date for a given program has to be filled with new product. The



FIGURE 28

A beautiful portrait of the friendship between two aging gunfighters (Randolph Scott and Joel McCrea), *Ride the High Country* shows Peckinpah's love for the West and his special regard for the Western.

unspoken credo of a series television director is simply to “get it, then forget it,” a strategy directly at odds with Peckinpah’s unwavering commitment to his material, no matter how frankly commercial. Veteran Western director Joseph Kane vividly described the relentless pace of directing an episode of a television Western: “[T]ake shows like *Rawhide*, *Laramie*, *Bonanza*, *Cheyenne*, which I did . . . you had to knock off around twenty-eight setups a day. Figure it out – you’ve got to do a setup every fifteen minutes. . . .”³ Peckinpah significantly developed his skills as a director on his various series episode assignments, acquiring a respect for professionalism and attention to detail that would be of immeasurable assistance throughout his career as a director of theatrical motion pictures.

Peckinpah’s second feature film as director, *Ride the High Country* (1962), was an elegiac Western that combined a number of

Peckinpah's major themes for the first time. Randolph Scott and Joel McCrea star in the film as two aging gunfighters, much like William Holden's and Robert Ryan's characters in *The Wild Bunch*; in addition, the cast members included future members of the Peckinpah Stock Company: R. G. Armstrong, Warren Oates, and L. Q. Jones. *Ride the High Country* is a quiet, almost meditational Western centering on the themes of change, the passing of time, the passages of friendship, honor and responsibility, and changing codes of conduct.

Peckinpah's next film, *Major Dundee* (1964), despite the backing of the star, Charlton Heston, was cut by the studio into an incomprehensible series of violent vignettes, without any of the necessary framing story to keep the film's action in context. The director turned in a first cut of two hours and forty-four minutes and felt confident that he could tighten the film up to a mutually agreeable running time. *Dundee's* narrative, centering on a sort of *Dirty Dozen* (or *Wild Bunch*) assault on the Apaches led by Heston as a cavalry officer, was bolstered by a gallery of excellent performances by James Coburn, Warren Oates, Slim Pickens, Ben Johnson, R. G. Armstrong, and L. Q. Jones – pretty much the Peckinpah rogues' gallery intact – but Columbia Pictures, the producers of *Major Dundee*, took the film away from Peckinpah after several disastrous previews and cut “forty-four minutes, almost 27 percent of the film's running time,” from the final version of the film.⁴

The savage recutting of *Major Dundee* was not well known outside the industry; thus, when *Major Dundee* opened to uniformly negative reviews, Sam Peckinpah was accorded the lion's share of the blame. Nor did Peckinpah help matters by publicly decrying Columbia's actions; between the release of *Dundee* in 1964 and the production of *The Wild Bunch* in 1969, Peckinpah labored as the screenwriter on Arnold Laven's *The Glory Guys* (1964) and Buzz Kulik's *Villa Rides* (1968); Peckinpah was to direct the latter before being fired by the film's star, Yul Brynner. Peckinpah found some measure of critical and commercial salvation during this period in television; his 1966 script and direction of *Noon Wine* for the anthology series *ABC Stage 67* was nominated for Best Television

Adaptation by the Writers Guild of America and for Best Television Direction by the Directors Guild of America.

Then came *The Wild Bunch* (1969), which was seen at the time as Peckinpah's last chance for a major feature breakthrough. For the first time – and, many would argue, for the last time – Peckinpah was afforded a decent budget, a generous shooting schedule, and a minimum of interference both during and after production of the film, resulting in a Western that Peckinpah had been leading up to with all his previous work and one that changed not only the face of the Western but that of American film altogether. As Jean Baudrillard accurately notes, “cinema plagiarizes itself, recopies itself, remakes its classical, retroactivates its original myths . . . [thus] cinema also approaches an absolute correspondence with itself.”⁵ Peckinpah was about to “retroactivate” the myth of the Western, to “remake” the classics of the Western genre in a totally new fashion, by introducing an entirely new world view into the interior landscape of his characters' motivations.

The Wild Bunch features a nearly perfect ensemble of actors from Peckinpah's stock company in both the major and minor roles: William Holden (Pike Bishop), Ernest Borgnine (Dutch Engstrom), Robert Ryan (Deke Thornton), the amazingly grizzled Edmond O'Brien (Eddie Sykes), Warren Oates and Ben Johnson (as Lyle and Tector Gorch, respectively, two of the less astute members of the group), Jaime Sanchez (the appropriately named Angel, a beatific sacrifice to the gods of violence), and Emilio Fernandez (Mapache). Each of these seasoned veterans plays off against the others as the individual gears in a monstrous mechanism of destruction. The bit parts are also indelibly etched: Strother Martin (Coffer) and L. Q. Jones (T.C.) as the two high-strung bounty hunters; Albert Dekker, porcine and detestable, in one of his last roles as Pat Hargigan, the hatchet man for the railroad; even Bo Hopkins (Crazy Lee) and Dub Taylor (Mayor Wainscoat) add both substance and reality to their relatively brief roles within the film. Add to this Peckinpah's extensive use of location shooting, his insistence on full coverage in both master and close-up shots from numerous angles for all scenes, and the director's determination to shoot as

much film as he felt was required (in the case of *The Wild Bunch*, some 333,000 feet of film and 1,288 camera setups) to get the film as close as possible to his original conception, and one can begin to discern to some degree the discipline, teamwork, and sheer drive and determination that finally brought the completed film down from a long and *very* rough cut to the final 145-minute version we have today.⁶

In the domain of *The Wild Bunch*, it is action that rules above all else (recalling, however perversely, F. Scott Fitzgerald's oft-cited axiom that "action is character"). As Jane Tompkins notes, "at the beginning of . . . *The Wild Bunch* a temperance leader [actually Dub Taylor's Mayor Wainscoat] harangues his pious audience ['In this here town, it's 5 cents a glass. *Five cents a glass*. Does anyone really think that that is the price of a *drink*?']; in the next scene, a violent bank robbery makes a shambles of their procession through town. The pattern of talk canceled by action [within the Western] always delivers the same message: language is false or at best ineffectual; only actions are real."⁷ This insistence upon action as the ultimate test of veracity within an individual or a system can be seen as part of the traditionally dominant structure of the Western, but it can also be turned against itself by being carried to extremes, which is what Peckinpah does in his work. Within the conventional Western, violence exists to question, and then to uphold in opposition, the remnants of the tenuous social fabric of society.

In this embrace of action as the true test of the individual, Peckinpah's film echoes its many generic precedents, all based on *physical action* by their protagonists more than any other motivational/narrational factor. Peckinpah maintained a delicate balance between his scenes of spectacle and violence and the more restrained expository scenes that simultaneously framed and commented on the exploding bridges, flying glass, and falling bodies that punctuate the narrative of *The Wild Bunch*. The film creates an atmosphere of constant tension within the spectator precisely because it is so contained, so controlled, that the violence just beneath the surface seems fully capable of bursting forth

at any moment. Indeed, these scenes of excessive spectacle (the opening massacre, the final shoot-out, and the grinning children adorning the edges of the film's framework as their "pet" scorpions and red ants devour each other) *form* a significant section of the film's narrative; they constitute a major portion of the text of the work.

The Wild Bunch is, in fact, a call for a complete revision of what audiences and critics had come to expect from the classical Hollywood Western; in its place, Peckinpah proposed a new model of his own, based on his long apprenticeship within the genre and his personal fascination with those who operate at the margins of conventional society – the losers, the misfits, men who are out of step with the rapidly changing times. Loss and despair permeate Peckinpah's vision of the West, and of the Western, in stark contrast to the sentimentalism of John Ford (*My Darling Clementine*,



FIGURE 29

The alienated, embittered Ethan Edwards (John Wayne) in *The Searchers* is a vivid precedent of the tormented, anguished misfits that Peckinpah would typically portray.

She Wore a Yellow Ribbon) and even the professional codes (the integrity and honor of a group of heroic and admirable men, as distinct from Peckinpah's corrupt outlaws) embraced by Howard Hawks (*Red River*, *Rio Bravo*). The cynical opportunism of Pike, Dutch, and the other protagonists of *The Wild Bunch* stands in stark contrast to John Wayne's alienated but still sympathetic characters in Ford's *The Searchers* (1956) or in Hawks's *Red River* (1948). In each film, Wayne plays an obsessed individual, bent only on the accomplishment of a single task (reclaiming a young girl kidnapped by Native Americans in *The Searchers*, getting the cattle through to the railroad link-up in *Red River*) at the expense of all other considerations, yet he still retains a good deal of humanity and warmth. Peckinpah's vision is far more bleak. In contrast to Wayne's heroism and victories in the Westerns of Ford and Hawks, there are no easy victories in the world of the Peckinpah Western; in fact, there are no victories at all. There is only the struggle, and the search, for some solidity within the confines of a rapidly changing and often overtly hostile landscape, and the certainty that time, and the human span of years, are quickly being exhausted. Racism and sexism are frankly acknowledged, and they aren't excused, ignored, or condoned. They exist as unfortunate yet unavoidable facts of human existence, and Peckinpah presents these social inequities as part of the tale he has to tell. Exhaustion itself identifies the world of the Peckinpah Western and sets it off from the more conventionally heroic films of Ford and Hawks. Peckinpah's characters are tired, aging, weary from often profitless effort.

Unlike *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), there is no certainty that a hastily rounded-up posse will effect the capture of the film's bandit protagonists; the cavalry will not come to the rescue of the beleaguered passengers, as in *Stagecoach* (1939). Pike Bishop (William Holden) or Deke Thornton (Robert Ryan) are as close to heroic figures as Peckinpah will allow in *The Wild Bunch*; though they may owe a degree of their professionalism to the Hawksian code of ethics, Peckinpah decisively rejects the macho heroics of John Wayne's various on-screen personae in such Ford films as *The*

Searchers, *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1949), *Rio Grande* (1950), or even *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence* (1962). Even at his most dissolute, Wayne's character in the films of Ford and Hawks retains a core of almost medieval chivalry; Pike Bishop's most sympathetic moment in *The Wild Bunch* occurs arguably near the conclusion of the film, when Bishop, after having sex with a young woman who has turned to prostitution to feed her infant child, throws a few extra coins in her direction with a momentary twinge of guilt. More emblematic of Pike's true personality is his joking with the other gang members about having sex with two Hondo whores in tandem with his curt instructions to the other members of the gang during *The Wild Bunch's* initial "set-up" robbery sequence, the oft-quoted "If they move – kill 'em." While Wayne's various characters are quick to dispense advice to, and act as a role model for, a gallery of young acolytes who grace such films as Hawks's *El Dorado* (1967), *Rio Bravo* (1959), and *Rio Lobo* (1970), Pike Bishop makes it clear to his associates that "I don't know a damn thing, except I either lead this bunch or end it right now." Bishop and his gang are not heroic role models, but killers whose residual humanity is simply greater than that of the venal bounty hunters who pursue them.

Yet John Ford and Howard Hawks were not the only influences on Peckinpah's work as a director of Westerns. Andrew V. McLaglen, Budd Boetticher, Michael Curtiz, Edward Dmytryk, Samuel Fuller, Henry Hathaway, Burt Kennedy, Fritz Lang, Anthony Mann, George Marshall, John Sturges, Raoul Walsh, and many others all brought their own series of thematic considerations to the Western genre. In many ways, as the *Cahiers du Cinéma* critics were quick to point out, the films of these genre artists were often more interesting and ambitious (socially and/or artistically) than the works of the more established directors within the genre. While it is true that McLaglen's Westerns are mostly efficient, workmanlike tales designed to offend no one (such as *McClintock* [1963]), they move along with style and assurance; Budd Boetticher created a series of dark, affecting character studies for the aging Randolph Scott in the now-classic Buchanan films (especially *Ride Lonesome* [1959])

and *Comanche Station* [1960]). Michael Curtiz and Fritz Lang both brought a sense of doom-laden nostalgia to their visions of the old West (see Curtiz's *Dodge City* [1939] and *Santa Fe Trail* [1940]). Raoul Walsh, whose matter-of-fact cruelty prefigured in some respects Peckinpah's later work (as seen most clearly in his non-Western *White Heat* [1949], the Westerns *The Lawless Breed* [1952] or *Gun Fury* [1952]), treated his subject matter with a more kinetic and, it might be argued, more assured hand. Anthony Mann brought a newly sadistic violence and a gallery of obsessed, neurotically driven characters to the Western in *Bend of the River* (1951), *The Naked Spur* (1952), *The Man from Laramie* (1955), and others. Sam Fuller, particularly in his wildly operatic *Forty Guns* (1957), staged one of the most violent shoot-outs in Western history for the conclusion of the film (a hostage is shot down in cold blood in order that the villain may be apprehended) while indulging along the way in a series of frenzied CinemaScope dollies of seven to ten minutes' duration through the streets of a dusty Western town. Robert Aldrich in *Vera Cruz* (1954) placed a cynical, amoral American adventurer in Mexico in a tale that clearly prefigures Peckinpah's own later work. These and other films helped establish a dark and cynical tradition in the Western, one that was often distinct from the more straightforward heroics of Ford and Hawks, and Peckinpah's work may be seen as a culmination of this line of development.

At the same time that Peckinpah was preparing for *The Wild Bunch*, there was another agency of social rupture at work within the cinema. The American Western was just one of many genres appropriated by the Italian cinema in the 1960s and jump-started by the auteurs of Cinecittà through the use of unprecedented doses of violence. The classical Hollywood Western was reconfigured most effectively by the disruptive figure of Italian director Sergio Leone, who created a compelling vision of monosyllabic nihilism in such films as *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964), *For a Few Dollars More* (1965), and *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (1966), all of which starred ex-television cowboy Clint Eastwood (late of the teleseries *Rawhide*, where he played the character of Rowdy Yates).



FIGURE 30

Sergio Leone's spaghetti Westerns, made in the mid-sixties, were far more violent and cynical than Hollywood films of the period.

Eastwood's trip to Italy was a last-ditch gamble for the actor; he needed to re-create a new image for himself, distinct from the nice-guy image he had used to such effect on television. Shrewdly, Eastwood and Leone cut the dialogue in these films down to almost nothing (which made dubbing the films into English and other "marketable" languages immeasurably easier); more tellingly, they stripped Eastwood's character of both a name and any motivation other than greed, lust, or a desire to kill, dubbing him "the man with no name." In addition, Eastwood urged Leone to directly violate a number of unspoken but still rigidly enforced Hollywood taboos against what was then regarded as excessive violence, such as showing the rapidly firing gun of a hired killer in the extreme foreground of a shot while the corpses of his victims pile up in the background of the frame.

The success of these films marked the public and critical acceptance of a new level of cinematic violence in the depiction of

the universe of the Western. Leone's films were followed by numerous imitations, including Enzo Castellari's *Go Kill and Come Back* (1968), Franco Giraldi's *A Minute to Pray, A Second to Die* (1967), Tonino Valeri's *A Taste for Killing* (1966), and many others. But something was missing in these hugely successful, resolutely bloodthirsty films: depth. The spectacle of violent death after violent death, interspersed with rapes, mutilations, hangings, and ritual executions, was accomplished in the spaghetti Westerns without even a modicum of character or motivation. These films raised the bar on the graphic specificity of violence, thus erasing the legacy of the sentimental West, but they were empty at the center. The films were nothing more or less than efficient killing machines, unreeling with mind-numbing, grisly assurance to reveal a core of absolute nonexistence. Peckinpah's films were violent, but they never sacrificed character or thematic development in their pursuit of the director's nihilist vision. Thus, the Italian films were more of a detour than anything else in the development of Peckinpah's career as a director; they simply opened the door to a new level of realism that made it possible for the director to bring his vision to the screen.

In the world of *The Wild Bunch*, Pat Harrigan (Albert Dekker), who works for the railroad and sends Deke Thornton after Pike and the rest of the Wild Bunch at the film's outset, is despicable because he "hires [his] killings' done" (in Deke's words), rather than pulling the trigger himself. As Thornton asks him, "Tell me, Mr. Harrigan, how does it feel getting paid for it? Getting paid to sit back and hire your killings with the law's arms around you? How does it feel to be so goddamned right?" to which Harrigan replies with vehemence, "Good!", indicating that within the social order of *The Wild Bunch*, all constituted authority is necessarily corrupt and appeals for mercy are worthless. When Angel's (Jaime Sanchez) village is pillaged by bandits, and Pike and the Bunch show up in the aftermath of the onslaught, they are disgusted but not all that surprised to discover that the assault has been the work of the *federales* under the malign leadership of the cruel and sadistic Mapache (Emilio Fernandez), a tin god of a feudal warlord, whose

authority rests only upon the rifles (and one machine gun) the Bunch agree to provide him with. Deke Thornton's band of hired assassins who search for the Bunch are described by Deke himself as "scum" and "worthless"; as two unctuously rapacious bounty hunters working for Deke, Coffey (Strother Martin) and T.C. (L. Q. Jones) distinguish themselves by the utterly loathsome relish they display as they rob the corpses of their various victims of cash, watches, and even the gold fillings from their teeth.

Although in the cultural landscape of *The Wild Bunch* violence is the only true social force, Bishop realizes that the days of smash and grab are nearly over: "We've got to start thinking beyond our guns" he tells the other gang members after the group's initial failed robbery. "Those days are closing fast." What the characters in *The Wild Bunch* want more than anything else is to do the impossible: turn back the clock to the days of their youth, and relative innocence, as Don José (Chano Urueta) intuitively observes during a conversation with Pike: "We all dream of being a child again, even the worst of us. Perhaps the worst most of all." Beyond innocence, on the twilight side of existence, there is only blind honor to hold to as a value. As Bishop tells his compatriots at one point, "When you side with a man, you stay with him. And if you can't do that, you're like some animal. You're finished! We're finished! All of us!" Above all other considerations, and despite their insistent embrace of violence as the only solution to the travails of existence, the members of the Bunch obey a twisted code of honor, if only to themselves. As Deke Thornton tells his motley crew of assassins, "We're after men, and I wish to *God* I was with them" (as Deke *had* been at one time, when he and Pike rode as outlaws together).

This emphasis upon honor is part of the traditional code of the Western. Honor is what Jane Tompkins refers to when she states that within the world of the Western, "it doesn't matter whether a man is a sheriff or an outlaw, a rustler or a rancher, a cattleman or a sheepherder, a miner or a gambler. What matters is that he be a *man* [original emphasis]. That is the only side to be on." Citing Deke's exclamation in *The Wild Bunch*, Tompkins concludes

that Deke's sentiments, "I think, [mirror] the way the audience of a Western feels when things are going right. I wish to God I was with them."⁸ *The Wild Bunch* offers us, at least on one level, the spectacle of the corrupt but honor-aspiring being chased by the purely corrupt (with the exception of Deke's reluctant leadership of those whom he so clearly despises). *The Wild Bunch* are *men*, especially men of action, and they will need the skills they possess to survive within the narrative domain Peckinpah forces them to inhabit.

Since all authority is corrupt, the world of *The Wild Bunch* is a brutal one, bereft of emotional solace and comfort. All of Peckinpah's characters are after their own interests at the expense of any and all other considerations; loyalties shift and twist under the pressure of the struggle to survive. No one can be trusted; love is an expensive illusion that is often transmogrified by circumstance into hate. Crime and currency go hand in hand; temperance (in



FIGURE 31

Henry Fonda's Wyatt Earp in *My Darling Clementine* typifies the gentlemanly, virtuous Western hero against which Peckinpah reacted.

all matters) is seen as a joke. The only hope is to keep on running, and death is inevitable. The dead, the dying, and the vultures dot the terrain of *The Wild Bunch*, always observed by the grinning children who will grow up to replicate the deeds of their mothers and fathers.

This bankruptcy of authority differs completely from the typical Fordian strategy of commonplace decency versus unbridled evil in such films as *My Darling Clementine* (1946), in which a sanitized and reformed Wyatt Earp (Henry Fonda) and a sympathetic outlaw loser, Doc Holliday (Victor Mature), join forces to do battle with malevolent Ike Clanton (Walter Brennan) and the other members of his family at the O.K. Corral. When Doc goes down to a martyr's death during the assault, Ford lingers on his consumptive's handkerchief as it flutters over the wooden planks of the corral's fence – Doc's spirit liberated, his atonement complete at last. There is nothing like this in Peckinpah's vision of the West.

In *The Wild Bunch*, the dead die without time for a moment's reflection; no redemption is involved, only the cessation of human existence. When Mapache slits Angel's throat near the conclusion of *The Wild Bunch*, he is cut down in a hail of reflexive gunfire from Pike, Dutch (Ernest Borgnine), and the other members of the gang. No one thinks about it; they all just *act*. Just seconds before, Mapache and his henchmen had been celebrating the acquisition of the rifles and the machine gun with drunken revelry in the town square. In the nervous laughter that haltingly follows their killing of Mapache, Pike, Dutch, and the other members of the Bunch realize that they have embarked upon a road from which there is no retreat. Violence will now be met with violence until all that is human is expunged.

In this regard, Peckinpah's spectacle of the futility of human endeavor builds on previous film work and has in turn been enormously influential. Fred Zinnemann's bleak depiction of the evasion of personal responsibility in *Act of Violence* (1949) and *High Noon* (1952) finds its logical conclusion in such Peckinpah films as *The Wild Bunch*, *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia* (1974), and *Straw Dogs* (1971); more recent films such as David Cronenberg's

Crash (1996), Mike Figgis's *Leaving Las Vegas* (1995), and Mathieu Kassovitz's *La Haine* (literally, *Hate*, 1995) have embraced the operational structures and rules of Peckinpah's morally problematic universe and applied it to contemporary society, where, all too sadly, they fit very well. The spaghetti Westerns of Leone and his Italian and Spanish compatriots, the modish violence of John Boorman's *Point Blank* (1967), and the fatalism of Fritz Lang's *Scarlet Street* (1945) all played their part in the formation of Peckinpah's code of perpetual self-examination and solitary defiance, but Peckinpah was the first to coalesce these disparate dystopian universes within the confines of a single narrative. *The Wild Bunch* reconfigured and revitalized the cinema in *all* genres, not just as a medium of moral agency but also as a plastic art. It is for this that Peckinpah's films are remembered, for the melding of violence with social commentary. Far from being a director predominantly of violence, as he is often considered, Peckinpah was more accurately an artist whose subject was the collapse of the Western and the concomitant eclipse of the world in which the Western once operated.

NOTES

- 1 David Cook, "Essay on *The Wild Bunch*," in *The International Directory of Films and Filmmakers*, Vol. 1, 2nd ed. (Chicago, 1990): 979–80.
- 2 Charles Flynn and Todd McCarthy, "Interview with Joseph Kane," in *Kings of the Bs: Working Within the Hollywood System*, ed. Todd McCarthy and Todd Flynn (New York, 1975): 323.
- 3 Flynn and McCarthy, 322–3.
- 4 Marshall Fine, *Bloody Sam: The Life and Films of Sam Peckinpah* (New York, 1991): 98.
- 5 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1994): 47.
- 6 David Weddle, "If They Move . . . Kill 'Em": *The Life and Times of Sam Peckinpah* (New York, 1994): 354.
- 7 Jane Tompkins, *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (New York, 1992): 51.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 18.

6 ***The Wild Bunch:* Innovation and Retreat**

To argue that *The Wild Bunch* is something less than the masterpiece it has been taken for (by some since 1969, by most since its time of reclamation more recently) is not to say that the critical fascination with it is misplaced. The film is too rich to deflect hyperbole for long. In generic terms, Sam Peckinpah's first attempt at Western *maudit* has a certain edge over most of the commonly sanctioned "classic" Hollywood Westerns, primarily because it comes closer to what we in this deconstructive and unromantic time imagine to have been *the real truth* of Old Western life: filth and frustration. Additionally, it revels in the bawdy muscularity and brutality that John Ford usually left implied in his hero's sidelong sneer, if at all, and it stripped away many of the tinselly trappings that all those reliable Hollywood hands (Hawks, Mann, their epigones) had draped over the carcass of the genre.

And politically it was the most potent Western since – since when? It came at a time in American history when each drop of movie blood was (probably correctly) felt to be originating from a point somewhere in the vicinity of the Mekong Delta. The film's violence lifted a simple story about what happens when men go to Mexico¹ into the realm of sociocultural comment, enabling the oldest of film schematics, that of the Western, to speak to the most

relevant social contingencies. Peckinpah had dismantled a genre and recast it under the heat of modern American history; the artist and his time conspired in creating a work singularly symptomatic of its moment.

Now, this is rhetoric plain and simple, and if there is a part of this writer that wants to believe in what the rhetoric says, there is another part that wonders if the thing itself still holds up. Well, it does and it doesn't. Precisely like *Bonnie and Clyde* – a film that influenced it as much as any Kurosawa samurai epic – *The Wild Bunch* is radical form imposed on pedestrian content, and unsurprisingly, it is only the radical currents that still carry the electricity of something genuinely new and potent, something that was made to change the perception of all who viewed it. (Change it to *what* is another question, one that Peckinpah's inferiors



FIGURE 32

Peckinpah opens the film with an audacious and savage shoot-out in San Rafael that promises to show viewers a West never before seen, felt, or heard on screen.

throw pennies at to this day.) Radical in its violence, the film still communicates death in a way that is both insanely urgent and reflectively distanced, convulsive and appreciative, in the manner of those painters (Picasso, Goya) Peckinpah has so often been allied to.² This much is obvious, so obvious as to be as impervious to revision as the hide of a white whale is to the harpoon.

But *The Wild Bunch*, when it is not choking on its violence, is a work as reactionary as the dime novels that in another time had so brazenly mythologized the West, that eagerly constructed false truths and turned to the most bilious of homilies to quantify everything that was wild and inchoate in the youthful country. Taken as a whole, *The Wild Bunch* sags from the weight of the clichés it buys into; it leaks power through holes of complacency. Despite the greatness in it, the film is a failure, and on no terms so much as those Peckinpah set for himself. He opens so audaciously, with a chaotic shoot-out that catches an entire town – old men, corseted matrons, tiny children – in its fire: a surge of bloody and outrageously displacing action to kick things off. What Peckinpah promises us here is a West (not just a Western) we haven't seen, heard, or felt before, shot through the prism of all that was sanitized out of the classic Western – not only filth and frustration, blood and guts, sex and sweat, but the heavy hand of a particularly savage mortality shadowing the Western heroes who used to ward off the buzzards with buffed buckskin and a long-legged stride. It is a promise made with the famous words that, so chilling and clever in the timing, precede Peckinpah's own name in the opening credits: "If they move, kill 'em." It is a promise and a threat, thrown at the audience like a knife – and Peckinpah doesn't make good.

Perhaps he couldn't make good, not at that time. *The Wild Bunch* is a personal film, and so its complacency, its evasions as both art and worldview, are Peckinpah's. It's the work of an auteur all right, but an auteur who, although visually prodigal is emotionally limited in terms of what he can convey with film. This movie, like its maker, does not know whether to go forward or back. It is excited by the thrill of the new but is afraid to relinquish

the comfort and moral certainty of the familiar. This is the schism the film inhabits, the internal conflict that defines what it is, the key to its failure.

As an individual, Peckinpah was contradictory in all the classic ways; as a filmmaker he was the same, possessed of a nature that folded inward in a division that determined equally his best choices and his worst. The biographical anecdotes sketch a man capable of surpassing loyalty and abrupt betrayal; a vociferous opponent of America's Vietnamese incursion who nevertheless vaunted his own Marine past; an autodidactic theorist of human aggression apparently powerless to fathom his own bulging veins and hairy chest. He was the scion of a rigid and exclusionary WASP family, yet the wealthy, prominent Peckinpahs were only a generation removed from the decidedly more savage realities of their pioneering forebears, and Peckinpah absorbed this grimmer history even as he was living within the protections of an established life. The early-twentieth-century Fresno over which the Peckinpahs and their set held sway was a modern frontier town in which saloons vied for the young man's attention alongside temperance unions, brothels alongside the guardians of sexual rectitude. "This disparity between the romantic myth and the reality of the Wild West," writes David Weddle, "provoked complex reactions in the young Sam Peckinpah. His deeply conflicted feelings toward both would later give his Westerns an incredible emotional charge."³

This charge comes from his vacillation between opposite poles, most often those representing a received (social or mythical) response to life and its vicissitudes as opposed to an internalized, personally interpreted response to them. An old story: Peckinpah's was a schizophrenia unique to the male American artist who is caught between what his macho conditioning tells him is true and what his artist's heart feels to be true. It is this schizophrenia that in *The Wild Bunch* allows the director to linger on the destruction wrought by his star killers even while sanctioning them for having their personal loyalties in place. It is this schizophrenia that dictates another film's sympathetic and fleshly portrait of the

bawdy, self-motivated woman (Hildy in *The Ballad of Cable Hogue*), only to contradict such a portrait with the next film's misogynistic depiction of sexually driven femininity (Amy in *Straw Dogs*). One reason Peckinpah is not the easiest filmmaker to embrace is that his work is rampant with right angles both ideological and artistic; he offends one's sense of single purpose. But by any realistic measure it would have been wrong to expect of Peckinpah anything other than a divided art, and difficult not to recognize that *The Wild Bunch* is a film fundamentally divided against itself.

But contradictions in and of themselves are no guarantee of aesthetic worth, though in a postmodern age suspicious of formal symmetry they can often be taken as such. Contradictions are productive only insofar as they are both unconscious and to some extent willful. This is to say that the contradictory impulses in an artist's nature must be subliminal enough to have a life and a play of their own, but that the artist must be aware of them and possess the skill and inspiration to make them work in his favor. In Peckinpah's signal work the contradictions are rendered fluid, dynamic; the opposing attitudes speak to, mitigate, reshape one another. When an artist lacks either the skill or the self-awareness, the contradictions register as dumb, immutable facts clashing insensately; witness the *Dirty Harry* series in which Nixonian law-and-order politics make nonsense of the hymn to rugged (read homicidal) individualism.

What made Peckinpah's contradictions count as aspects of a sensibility was, simply, that he finally was aware of them – even if he was only sometimes able to incorporate them into his works in productive ways. Unlike so many other indulgers in manic-depressive, passive-aggressive, constructive-destructive extremes, he was sufficiently clear of eye to spot the psycho-symbolic portents in his own background; hence his tight connection to those divergent elements that were determining his work. Peckinpah spoke of being raised by a mother who believed “absolutely in two things: teetotalism and Christian Science,”⁴ but he was thinking of the loggers and trappers and mountaineers among his ancestors when he said, “My people were all crazy . . . just crazy.”⁵ Perhaps

he was thinking of both when he staged the *Wild Bunch's* opening, with its teetotalers and crazies caught in a conflict so savage and direct that it gives some idea of the acuteness of the contradiction as Peckinpah must have perceived it. This – a schizophrenia realized, in some portion submitted to – was what enabled and even forced Peckinpah to contradict himself more flagrantly than any contemporary moviemaker, to move from the cold, raw condemnations of *Straw Dogs* to the folksy warmth of *Junior Bonner*, in which no character is so harshly judged – with neither the condemnation nor the generosity registering, in its context, as a false posture.

So all right, Peckinpah was large, he contained multitudes; where does this position *The Wild Bunch*? Firmly under the sway of this schizophrenia.

All of Peckinpah's contradictions expressed in their various ways one umbrella contradiction: the impulse toward innovation, the drive forward, weighing against an equally strong draw backward – backward in history, in values, in cinematic style. A man of his moment with the mentality of a frontiersman, Peckinpah saw in the Western a depiction of past times that he could make over in the image of a new world. If his attraction to the Western as a genre indicates his nostalgia, his brutalization of the old materials into a new form evinces a drive far more radical than reactionary.

But all of this is after the fact. Peckinpah had to discover for himself, film by film, everything that appears evident to us now. *The Wild Bunch*, a work constipated and not mobilized by its contradictions, so confident in its violent technique and so needlessly regressive otherwise, is transitional, a lesson Peckinpah was teaching himself. What to hold on to and what to outgrow; how to parlay a radical vision of violence into an inclusively radical vision of the Western genre and of life as it could be portrayed within the confines of a commercial art form. He did not know himself in the sense that we as his analysts pretend to know him, but he learned.

A certain literary orthodoxy has it that the first and last paragraphs of any serious novel are bound to be microcosms front and

back of the present project. Let's first consider the opening and penultimate scenes of *The Wild Bunch*, where Peckinpah unleashes in most concentrated form the violence that he became famed for, the violence that gives this film its still-live wire of radical energy. And then let's consider the rest of the film.

As always, Peckinpah's prelude girds several fields of action simultaneously: The bunch ride into town for what they expect will be a routine bank job; Deke Thornton's scurvy ghouls load up for an ambush; the temperance society preaches pieties; giggling children play Lord of the Flies. The flow of imagery is fluid despite being particularly dense with portentous movement, strikingly physical, very much in the present tense. But as each credit appears the on-screen image is fixed in place for several seconds, and all color and definition are excised, leaving only a rough, minimalist version of that fixed image – an approximation, clearly, of frontier photography and lithography, redolent of "Wanted" posters, daguerreotypes, parchments blanched with age.⁶

Surely Peckinpah's motive in imposing this formal tic was to presage the past-present conflict, but in doing so he also gives us the first glimpse of the movie's unproductive schism – that contradiction between Peckinpah's obeisance to outmoded tradition and his fervor for translating it into a new film language. For more than anything, these credits are, in pure film terms, about motion versus stasis, the director's desire for present-tense movement set off against his impulse to crystallize selected moments of time into instant history. Innovation demands a multileveled engagement with the immediate moment, while retreat reaches for the simpler, less detailed evocation of the past.

But if this opening scene defines what will eventually prove to be the film's limits, it is also challenging and dynamic enough in both form and feeling to escape those limits. This is even more true of the sequence that will end the picture, one of the most famously contradictory sequences in any film, the one that horrifies as it thrills, disgusts as it delights, inspires anger as much as approbation. The film's concluding massacre is five or six minutes of pure paroxysm, aurally a concrete block of uninterrupted gunfire and prolonged kamikaze screams, visually a danse macabre composed

of clumsy lurchings cut against the most elegant and unlikely balletic movement, with bodies either isolated or in concert wafting sideways, floating skyward, drifting down. Peckinpah maintains both the grace and the pressure until there comes a point where the viewer who is not beaten back into blindness achieves what D. H. Lawrence calls “the pitch of extreme consciousness.”⁷ Formal beauty issues even from the filth. Bullets raise great plumes of dust in long rows, and each puff is a Busby Berkeley dancer throwing her kick. The sequence is musical in its small symmetries, its syncopations. Ernest Borgnine sinks heavily to earth, his unheard thud a downbeat setting up for the detonating hand grenade and the pinwheeling of a half-dozen Mapache soldiers through the air. The film loses its mind, and with insanity comes an unimagined lucidity.

A passionate, astonishing, genius five minutes – a short film about killing. It’s enough to redeem *The Wild Bunch* from its own hackneyed soul and clichéd *longeurs* – if rhetoric carries the day. Otherwise, no. The film that has preceded this climax has been too sane by half: too well adjusted to the very conventions of genre and medium that the massacre makes irrelevant. The aesthetic insanity of it, total enough for the viewer to lose all spectatorial identity in its tide, is not retroactive; it is self-contained, its blood doesn’t spill over onto the rest of the picture. Finally, the climax is emotionally overwhelming not because it is itself an emotional act or because it forces a confrontation with loss, but simply because it is so *climactic*, for Peckinpah as much as for any viewer. It releases the largely untapped energies of the previous two hours, energies dammed by schematic characters, melodramatic confrontations, sentimental elisions, and tumescent whorehouse romps. Like many an act of murder in the real world, Peckinpah’s kiss-off of the Wild Bunch is a way of breaking the tedium – violating the routine one has set for oneself.

But it’s worth asking what the violence and Peckinpah’s styling of it have to do with the film’s unproductive schism. In a way, the violence itself encapsulates the schism – only here it does, within its limits, function productively. The violent style of *The Wild*

Bunch is Peckinpah's trademark, snippets of real time knotholing the smooth grain of slow motion, the liquid free falls and crash landings versus the jarring, inelegant rip of a moment's brutality. The interruptions of violence in real time represent that same innovative drive, putting across violence with a new force and explicitness, while the rhythmic cuts in and out of slow motion pull back to something less confrontational, more considered. The real-time cuts are in a sense antiaesthetic: blunt, ugly, factual. Slow motion has the other effect, that of reifying the chaotic present-tense action into something only marginally physical and wholly aesthetic, freezing chaos under a cool gaze, the gut-shot body no longer flesh and tissue so much as a sculpted object falling languidly through indeterminate space. The combination of textures, of staccato and legato, militates against the unreflective impact of mere shock, and forestalls the intellectual oblivion that is usually the partner of kinetic excitement. This is where the schism – that tension between backward and forward movement – does not hinder the integrity of the material but achieves it, enlarges rather than cramps one's perception of it. If *The Wild Bunch* is a constipated work, then, the violence has the effect of a laxative in the body of the whole film, allowing the art to flow rather than stopping it up.

But this success points up Peckinpah's inability at this stage of his career to instill his nonviolent scenes with the same kinds of sensual complications. The violent heights of the film – the initial shoot-out, the dynamiting of the bridge, and the climactic massacre – are peaks separated by great lengths of comparatively barren incident and encounter, scenes not freighted with the same weight, not occupying the same matrix of meaning. Because outside of its violence the film is too much a collection of unquestioned surfaces, of obvious exigencies – its life is all exterior, nothing unifies it subliminally. *The Wild Bunch* has *political* subtext to spare, but the Vietnam parallels were an association the film's audience was already prepared to make; these implications are present but thoughtlessly so, a confirmation of the obvious rather than a foray into the ambiguous. The film is notably short on the

subtext that derives from visual and emotional styles deployed in the invisible ways that secretly structure a viewer's whole response to a film – just that realm where Peckinpah could have proven himself another kind of master, and later did, though by then few seemed to care.

The film's undercurrent – that hidden auto-critique that all works yield in some form – does not buttress the radical, death-centered implications of the violence. Rather, it reiterates the dewy-eyed macho romance of the screenplay, not to mention that of the Hollywood Western tradition, the limits of which Peckinpah sought to explode. (It makes sense, John Wayne feeling that *The Wild Bunch* “would have been a good picture without the gore.”⁸) In this regard it is decidedly inferior to *The Searchers*, an archetypal Hollywood Western, wherein the racist text was qualified by a succession of red-drenched images that suggested something bloody and guilty bubbling up from the unconscious of the Western genre. Granted that Peckinpah seldom worked on the level of purely visual implication: His individual images, unlike those of, say, Antonioni or Kubrick, are not usually fraught with meaning – “meaning” here referring to a symbolic or extratextual level of interpretation, as opposed to the emotional and visceral meanings his best films are rife with. For Peckinpah the meaning most often resides in such subtleties as the juxtaposing of images, the modulating of rhythms and energies from scene to scene, the physical terrain of the actors.

At his best, Peckinpah was able to unify a film in a way that had nothing to do with the standard chinoiserie of auteurist style and everything to do with simple tonalities – visual and emotional moods pervasive enough to communicate ambiguity even when a screenplay mouthed platitudes. The deep blues and blacks of *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* – its deemphasizing of the redemptive possibilities of landscape and light – are endemic to its slack-eyed depiction of a new West that is bruised, battered, and sexually spent, and gaunt with age. For *Straw Dogs* Peckinpah used locations and surfaces to instill palpable cold in each frame, to give scenes the taste of metal and the texture of slate, and basted the result in a

dirt-colored half-light that mocked any triumphal aspect that might have attended David Sumner's coup de grace.

The Wild Bunch is visually and emotionally generic in comparison, and not simply because there's only so much novelty a director can impart to the same yellow desert, yet another clapboard hamlet, the eternal hacienda. Directors from William Wellman (*The Ox-Bow Incident* [1943] – perhaps the first noir Western) to Monte Hellman (*The Shooting* [1965, released 1967] – horse opera as ghost story) have shown that even this ancient genre can pulse with new blood if squeezed at the right pressure points. Though Peckinpah achieves this level of innovation in his framing and cutting of the violent passages, those long stretches in between – when dialogue and dusty trail must carry the film's whole burden – are put forth in a mode that wavers between nostalgic languor and dyspeptic impatience. Thematically they are loaded with Peckinpah's reactionary temperament (typified by too many scenes of hearty male laughter fatalistically booming in a nonexistent abyss), while texturally they are void of his innovative temperament, which craved new ways to impart to death a beauty and a terror, a meaning and a moral weight.

In these long passages bridging the set pieces – the “character” scenes, the majority of the picture – Peckinpah treats death like weather, talking about it (usually in aphorisms) but not doing anything about it. Such scenes as Dutch and Pike's fireside dialectic on mortality (“Back off to *what?*”) may speak to death as a theme, but tonally and as visual realizations they evade the issue by seeming arch, obligatory – felt, perhaps, but in a too-familiar way. So much else in the picture, what should be the emotional guts of it – the guts that all the violence would ideally blow open, spread out in a new context for our reconsideration – is in this way devalued, denied the rude energy, the immediacy of *action lived in the moment*. There is rudeness in the film, to be sure, but of a genre-approved variety; cliché lives at the heart of that rudeness, and freezes it.

There is Peckinpah's dotage on Albert Dekker as Harrigan, the railroad boss who cracks the whip behind Deke Thornton. If this

man represents evil, the death force loose in the capitalist mind, no one need lose sleep: As offered to us, the diabolical Harrigan wears a Snidely Whiplash cosmetic scowl, and is so grincing and fulsome in his evil that it is impossible to imagine his like insinuating itself poisonously into the American scene, for who would take him for anything but the backlot villain that he is? In a better film this man would represent himself first of all; then he would represent the railroad, and money, and capitalist rapacity, and the rest. He would have his reasons; he would not subsist merely on the bread and water of undirected sadism.

So many tired pranks in this story. The mangy comedy of Strother Martin and L. Q. Jones has no place in a film of this intended seriousness; meant as comic relief, their byplay only annoys because it is not strikingly comic and because the idea of relief is again the film's trapdoor. Relief from innovation, relief from tension, from the threat of death – Peckinpah is relieving us left and right, letting us off every hook his violence puts up. Then there is the detour to the Mexican village of Angel's birth, quoting a scene from *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* and posed as an idyll from the Hollywood wax museum: appreciative, gringo-loving Mexicans biding their time until revolution comes, Angel puffing his noble chest with vengeful, noble thoughts. The Bunch move on to Mapache territory, and they are sent off with a song. Pappy Ford himself would weep, and partly out of appreciation: His tradition is not disturbed by these scenes; their dues to the tradition are paid in full.

It is not necessarily mere political correctness to decry the excess of a white American male's macho sentimentality in the picture, from the cultural imperialism of the Bunch being serenaded by worshipful Mexicans to Angel's impulsive murder of his ex-lover Teresa, a wanton act of the phallus swept away in the wake of the men's hysterical laughter. Buffoonery of any kind can be given depth if the perspective is right – if the artist knows it well enough to share in it at the same time he is revealing it. But here it has no depth because Peckinpah, though he is sharing in it only to a degree, is not revealing it at all. If anything, the director shows

more complicity with the infantile abandon of the Gorch boys than with Pike's fleeting intimations of disaster. When the Gorchs shoot holes in wine barrels and shower in the spray with their whores, or when Mapache's men suck tequila off the compliant legs of village women, there is always an overlay of music to boost the occasion – trumpets and mariachi, music with a hint of parody, but more than a hint of triumph. Visually the camera's eye is anything but critical. The director is prodding along these revels, offering them as the rewards of a man's tiring, dirty work, an entertainment in which we are to share.

Fine – if the buffoonery is going to be complicated by its opposite, the sense that these are grown boys acting out a little boy's fantasies of pillage, that the macho sentiment is an evasion of life because it is an evasion of fear. But Peckinpah does not go far in spelling this out. So the scenes of lusty male bravado lie effectively dormant and unrelievedly asinine. But in the case of *The Wild Bunch*, this is more than the old Hemingway bluster showing itself. It is again the call of nostalgia, and these scenes act as correctives to all the instability thrown up by the violence. A complacent audience takes comfort in the bluster: *This* we understand – this old movie world where men are men and women are receptacles or at best (the treacherous Teresa) the deus ex machina to trip a man's righteous trigger. We're paying homage to the genre, we're situated in a tradition. Relief.

There is one component to the film, aside from its violence, that threatens to defy relief, and it points in a direction Peckinpah would only later follow. This component is Robert Ryan as Deke Thornton – both the actor and the character. It isn't foolish to speak of Deke as the film's symbol of death in life, a man compelled to move forward but arrested in time. Unlike his opposite number, Pike, Deke has no facile escape hatch from the modern predicament. Pike, being an outlaw unreconstructed, can – must – blast his way into the next world, achieve heroism in that final blaze, the heroism obviating his outlaw's weakness, his lack of direction. But Deke, by virtue of the choices he has made, is the one who must go on living in this new America where nothing will

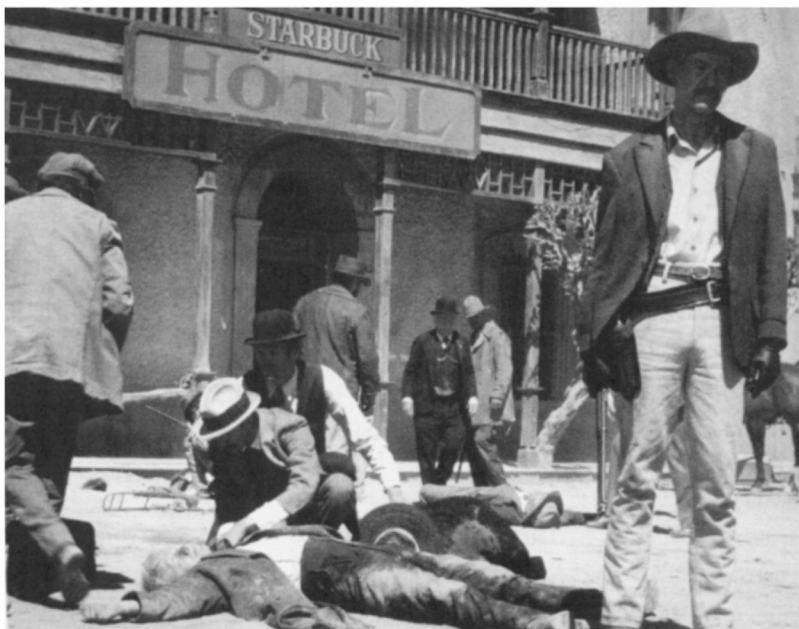


FIGURE 33

Deke Thornton (right) is the film's symbol of death in life, a man whose torments are more complex than those of Pike and the Bunch.

be self-evident, must willingly enter the limbo history has laid in for him. His torments are more complex than those assigned to any of the Bunch, and they are more viscerally present in Ryan's scenes because Ryan plays Deke as a stooped, nearly beaten oak of a man; close to demented by his conflicts but quiet and sure of his movements; dead in the eyes but terse and forceful in action. Physically he is all contradiction, all angles and abrasions that will not resolve, and emotionally he has the sharp edge of real conflict that might conceivably have ennobled and vitalized the contradictions of the work itself.

But Deke is a symbol that nags and never takes hold, for Peckinpah doesn't have him at the center of the story, where he should be. Each time Deke appears, the film deepens and becomes some-

thing more haunted, the film haunted by its darkest notion of itself; but then the scene shifts, the shadow is averted, the film attains its relief. Peckinpah gives this pattern away early. Following the opening shoot-out, Ryan walks sad-eyed through the corpse-ridden streets, and Peckinpah looks down with him at the splayed bodies, all that residual hysteria; then, too quickly, the moment is over, foreshortened by Dekker's stagy bark and the imperatives of narrative machinery. More than once in his handling of Deke, Peckinpah leads his audience to the precipice and then whisks it to the next genre banality without allowing time for the impact to sink in. Catharsis is terminated before it begins, the contemplation of death not even a memory, more the wisp of a discarded fancy.

This aftertaste, essential if the film is going to constitute a *spiritually* – if not formally – unified attack on cinematic propriety and the audience's emotional distance, is shortchanged. Other roads are not taken, either, or they are glancingly assayed. The epochal social transformation these characters are meant to embody – capitalist hegemony in, free-range individualists out – stands monolithically at the center of the film. Peckinpah means in some way to excoriate the expediencies of an America newly mechanized, urbanized, and capitalized. But lacking the urgency of something reimagined in terms of a particular kind of social violence, the tragedy of human obsolescence remains a dramatic stratagem rather than a true theme, abstract from the physical violence that fires off around it. The passing of the Old West had been a common movie complaint at least since Ford's *The Iron Horse* of 1924, and Peckinpah makes no radical move to revitalize or subvert the superannuated conceit. Perhaps he believed in it too much – or too little – to question it, but whatever the reason, there are scant reserves in the film of the one emotional element that would have enabled it to put a human face on a hoary cliché. That element is fear – fear of not only one's own physical death, but of the death of the entire world one has known, the consigning to the dustbin of history of one's collective identity and milieu. This is what the drama of social transformation means in human terms, at least

for those not in a position to sit at the throne of a new world order; this is the drama that, if treated comprehensively, might have set the film tensing with the fear it lacks. Instead Peckinpah bargains low for the predigested inevitabilities of a hundred other cowboy-movie scenarios. Nostalgia.

And so he defines the drama in terms that are false to the style. The violence that Peckinpah glories in and devotes his energies to needs an equally rich insinuation of dread to carry through emotionally as well as kinetically. The great film that *The Wild Bunch* is not would make more of the small, everyday deaths that prefigure the big death, would fortify its geysers of blood with a strong undercurrent of hot, quiet despair, and would render the twilight of the gunmen in emotional shades as novel and unnervingly subtle as the physical. What all of this means in effect is that although the violence as artistic form and expression stands up, it stands too much alone. The bloodshed is not as integral to the film that surrounds it as it may seem. The world of *The Wild Bunch* is a world in which violence occurs, but it isn't, as it has to be, a violent world. The violence of it has been referred to as "spectacular,"⁹ and it is; but were it truly integral, it would not be so much a spectacle as an intensification of emotional tones and existential fears already present in the most dispensable mundanities of dialogue and set design, the length of a shot or the cinematographic play of light on water.

This yields a clue to the film's ultimate failure of vision, and points out the singular superiority to it of *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*. For *Pat Garrett* does everything *The Wild Bunch* does not do. It reimagines its clichés, sometimes word for word, in terms that are not themselves clichéd; it gives the resonance of tragedy to the social transformations that render its heroes historically absurd; it uses the filmmaker's particular materials to depict a world in which violence is not spectacle but only a blunter version of business as usual. And it is an utterly despairing vision.

This last is especially important. It's not often noted that *The Wild Bunch* is, despite its violence, finally an attempt at an affirmation – of life, of camaraderie, of manhood. This is inherent in

the material: the clichés of the story themselves affirm the refuge the screenplay takes in generic scenes played out obligingly. But more than this, Peckinpah bolsters that fundamental affirmation in so many ways that it must have been purposeful on his part. The picture is filled with laughter, its sound hollow but not desperate; this isn't the laugh of men drowning out death with the ring of bonhomie, merely men responding obliviously to the onrush of doom. The macho buffoonery, to repeat, is shown not as an evasion of fear but as an embrace of life. And the film's resolution, even coming so soon after the massacre, is ineffably "up." Among the points scored at the last are the rough justice meted out to Thornton's gang of corpse robbers; the assurance that the villagers' resistance will continue; and the reunion of Deke and Sikes, the survivors left to renew a once hearty and potent Bunch. There is the smile on Ryan's face – and here Peckinpah finally gives that one nagging symbol its relief – when Edmond O'Brien delivers the film's last line: "It ain't like it used to be, but . . . it'll do." In the event that we do not take these words to mean precisely what they say, Peckinpah then brings up the music and stretches out O'Brien's enduring cackle – surely the longest continuous laugh in screen history – till it meets a series of curtain calls showing the stars also laughing, carefree, as they were in life. Presumably their spirit lives on in all men. Affirmation. And an affirmation that is nothing if not shamelessly nostalgic, a last sentimental reach for the safety and final moral order of another time, for that dim and ill-defined past.

In the face of all this, it hardly matters whether Peckinpah truly meant for the violence to have the effect of embittering the material and traumatizing the audience, or if he only staged these grand savageries to gratify some personal perversity. (Or, as is most likely, both.) What matters is not intent but effect, what a filmmaker leaves on the screen and what a film leaves on an audience – and by this measure, Peckinpah's postmassacre coda recapitulates everything affirmatively, tidily, and dubiously; picks it up and dusts it off, as it were, and sends it out bravely to face another day. Does the memory of death, which an audience sheds

easily enough in any case, stand a chance against the sequential return of our heroes in cross-faded, soft-edged vignettes, enjoying a final belly laugh to the unctuous backing of the Mexican lullaby? Undeniably, the final note is of grace, resurrection from mere temporal death into the nominal afterlife of hagiography. This is what an audience is left with, and it is left with a lie – at the very least, the kind of rhetorical simplicity that, from an artist as bitter as this, will always seem less than the truth, no matter how necessary it may be to the completion of a certain dramatic form.

The sentiment of uplift was not Peckinpah's *métier*, and he knew it – or came to know it, perhaps in part from having made *The Wild Bunch*. So, when, a few years later, he returned to the development of a long-dormant screenplay about Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid that in its elemental conflict – unregenerate outlaw pursued by self-loathing ex-confederate – is identical to *The Wild Bunch*, it made sense that he should now concentrate on the conflicted pursuer rather than the bandit whose code of honor and moral designations remain relatively undisturbed throughout. *Pat Garrett* is a far deeper, more troubling business than *The Wild Bunch* precisely because its protagonist is not Pike Bishop but Deke Thornton.

Even at his most demoralized, Peckinpah still had a romantic streak, and *Pat Garrett* is sentimentally elegiac to the extent that it finishes off Billy the Kid with a glamorized Christly death in a lachrymose setting. But its elegy is unsettled, hedged, far from absolute, as if Peckinpah now knew what he hadn't known four years earlier – that in the only terms honest to himself, death had to be treated as a true end, not as a mere passageway leading out at the credits to the netherworld of posthumous glory. This is why, as against the laughter and communal singing of *The Wild Bunch*'s wistful peroration, *Pat Garrett* closes on its conflicted hero hitting the dust under a mercenary's bullets. Visually it explicitly recalls Joel McCrea sliding out of the frame at the end of *Ride the High Country*. But the meaning of the image has been pulled inside out: Now death is wrapped up in betrayal and defeat, not in the final defense of honor or the anticipation of a secondary life in Hollywood heaven.

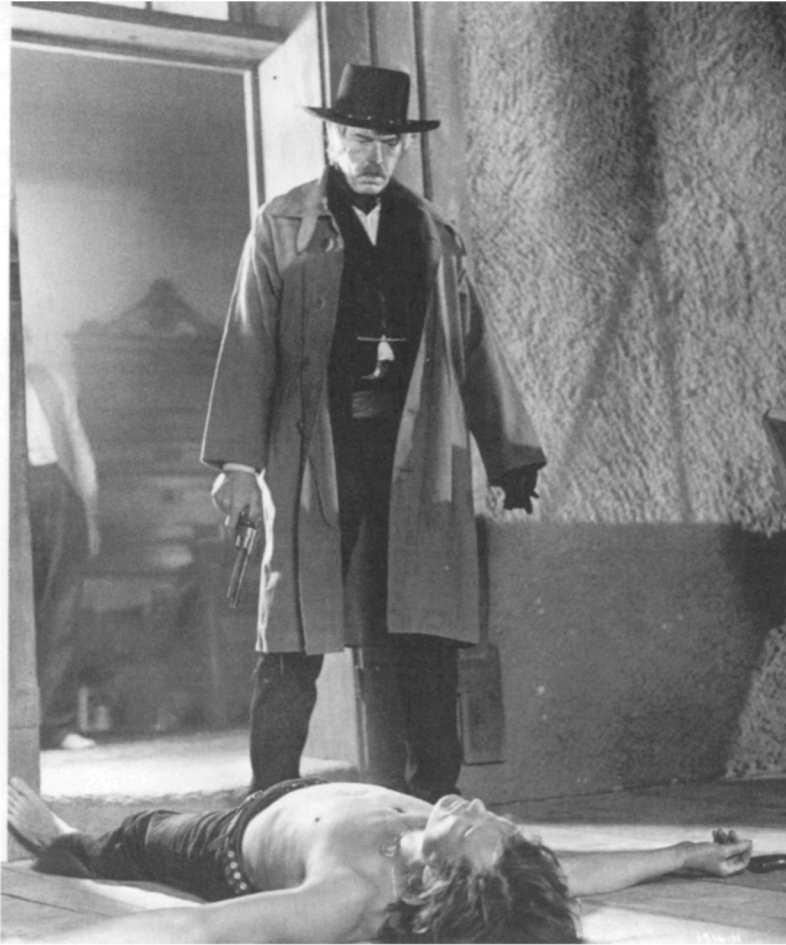


FIGURE 34

Pat Garrett (James Coburn) stands over the body of Billy the Kid.

This would also explain the *Pat Garrett* role Peckinpah reserved for himself. Just before Garrett kills Billy, the filmmaker appears, spitting taunts from a shadowy perch, as the coffin maker.

Peckinpah was a profound pessimist. This is obvious in the craggy, weary, suspicious tone of his films, their cumulative aroma of

disgust, their general avoidance of salvation as a viable out. His abiding legacy as a filmmaker precluded any other stance: It was conscious choice as much as family background or anthropological theory that led him to become the Picasso of violence rather than the Renoir of love scenes. And as a profound pessimist, Peckinpah could achieve his greatness only when working toward a vision that realized pessimism, the one value in which he could finally, completely believe.

Everything he produced was pessimistic in the sense that confrontation resulting in death was its natural end point, but Peckinpah at his greatest – his most committed and convincing – exercised the rigor to take the pessimism clear through the climax to the final frames so that one's memory of the film could not escape it. Does *The Wild Bunch* leave us with a memory of death? Violence, yes, but not death. Those final guffawing curtain calls – patronizing strokes on the brutalized sensibilities of the audience, the Bunch could be wearing angels' wings – are meant to enfold what came before in a wrap of warmth, to qualify, to soften, even to erase that memory of death; and this they do. The facility of this reversal is in itself impressive – Peckinpah was a pro – but its deliberate retrenchment betrays a director frightened of the implications of the violence he was about to show the world, afraid of going too far into the darkness it threw before him.

But *The Wild Bunch* gave him the notoriety and popular sanction to test himself further; it enabled him to work out his visual strategies of violence on a grand scale; and it gave him a place to deposit several years' worth of frustrated artistic energies and then to consider the components of the result. Peckinpah, to his credit, found the nerve necessary to confront those implications that he had before seemed eager to gloss over: *Pat Garrett*, his final Western, was also his final (disciplined) venture into that darkness and his finest realization of it.

So *The Wild Bunch* was a step in a process – a crucial step, but a step only. This process was one of patricide. Freud called it the "Oedipus complex," and when considering the lives of the poets, Harold Bloom labeled it "the anxiety of influence"; apply it to

Peckinpah's famously mottled, disproportionate career and that career takes on a shape, a sense, a direction it never seemed to have. Peckinpah's patricide was such that he had to kill the Hollywood Western that spawned him before he could create something entirely his own.

If words occur to describe the phenomenon, they are Malraux's: "A heritage is not transmitted; it must be conquered; and moreover it is conquered slowly and unpredictably."¹⁰ Peckinpah conquered his heritage even more slowly and unpredictably than most. Certainly his first important film, *Ride the High Country*, sees him positioned, as a young director, firmly within the very tradition he would ultimately (symbolically) terminate – here following the rules of that tradition with a particular grace but never pushing them past their most comfortable limits, and offering almost no stylistic hint of where his more personal concerns would later lead him. As a Hollywood Western, *Ride the High Country* is exemplary not only for its skillfulness but because it is pure genre. It proves Peckinpah knew the tradition – the first step in violating it.

The aborted epic *Major Dundee* was more genre exercise than subversion, though it did feature early attempts at realistic violence that were hobbled by Peckinpah's evident confusion as to how far be wished to take them. Stilted and impersonal, the film is marginal in Peckinpah's career and represents no significant advance over *Ride the High Country*. *The Wild Bunch* was his first concerted, self-conscious attempt to radically redefine the Western genre. But again it was only a step in this direction. Its success in subverting the traditional Western is limited entirely to its violence; otherwise, it embraces that tradition, unaware of how moot the violence has rendered the tradition, unwilling to effect a growth in mentality and genre commensurate with the radicalism of the violence. And fatally, it undermines the force of its disturbing and innovative use of violence by trading it for an affirmation that in the film's own terms is conventional, formulaic, and unconvincing.

Peckinpah's step-by-step deconstruction of the traditional Western can be traced through his shifts in attitude with regard to this

affirmation and the recurring images he uses to index them. As an interim statement bridging the divergent Western revisions of *The Wild Bunch* and *Pat Garrett, Straw Dogs* – nothing but a Western in modern dress – is informed by an ambivalence so cutting that it obliterates affirmation even as a fantasy; if anything, affirmation is a structuring absence. Like *The Wild Bunch*, *Straw Dogs* ends with the hero's smile, the ride of the hero away from the camera and into darkness – but only those watching with one eye shut would claim that David Sumner's smile is unburdened or that his darkness leads to glory rather than merely to a deeper darkness.

Pat Garrett achieves the final synthesis. Its despair, as opposed to the affirmation of *The Wild Bunch*, is seeded throughout the film, from first scene to last, supported meanwhile by a filmic universe of converging details. It is convincing. In its scorn of conventional heroics, its disdain for the moralistic claims of a bought-and-paid-for law, its certainty that commerce as much as murder will out, it kills the Western dead, at least that part of it that had anything to do with Peckinpah.

But the breakthrough would not have happened had *The Wild Bunch* not been made, for if *The Wild Bunch* was an orgasm, *Pat Garrett* is the cigarette afterward. Reflection follows cataclysm in the sequence described by these films. In many ways *Pat Garrett* is a virtual retracing of the steps Peckinpah took in *The Wild Bunch*, a retracing that takes in those depths not countenanced before. This starts with the *Pat Garrett* credit sequence, which also employs real time and stop time, and intercuts the past of Billy the Kid with the present of Pat Garrett – Billy's bullets reaching across the decades to slay his old friend and ultimate killer, two levels of time in a dynamic interaction. This interplay is thematically a very simple idea and cinematically a very profound one. For the dramatization of past and present as *equally* dynamic is precisely what *The Wild Bunch* lacks; and it is Peckinpah's catching up with the full visual and emotional realization of this idea that makes *Pat Garrett* his masterpiece.

The *Wild Bunch* massacre has its echoes in the final scene of *Pat*

Garrett. After Pike's killing of Mapache, the Bunch and the hundreds of soldiers are caught in a long pause, frozen in an uncertain grasp for the nearest gun, the knowledge of what is about to happen dawning on every man's face. The pause goes on, and there is a frisson in these terrible moments unlike anything in cinema. But an even deeper frisson runs through the similar pause that precedes Garrett's symbolic suicide – after shooting Billy he shoots himself in a mirror. The same realization of death that met the Bunch in those moments before the massacre meets Garrett here: The same pause is followed by the same destruction of self. Even the blasted mirror has been seen before. In the midst of the massacre Pike also shoots through one, but there it was plain confusion, it meant nothing; in *Pat Garrett* it is a fully considered, determined act, and it means everything.

The movement Peckinpah has described in the arc between these two climaxes is toward something self-directed and self-eviscerating, a more interior and personalized psychology of violence. The psychology of *Pat Garrett* is just as simple as that of *The Wild Bunch*, but only in the sense that human psychology, as it truly lives and operates under the academic mouthwash, is often simple. But Peckinpah makes the psychologically simple emotionally complex in ways that were not accessible to him at the time of *The Wild Bunch*. He does this, again, by pursuing more than a merely nostalgic, genre-defined connection to the past, by giving its mysteries a weight equal to the contingent realities of the present, and by filling out the abstractions that are genre codes with the specificities of individualized characters.

This is why, when Peckinpah reaches the pinnacle of both his art and his pessimism, the focus is on the individual, not the Bunch. And, accustomed as we are to praising the artful mass deaths of *The Wild Bunch*, it may be quite a while before we realize that each of the killings in *Pat Garrett* – and there are many – occurs singly. There are no wholesale slaughters in which faces and identities disappear and some abstraction of death itself is the only presence. In Peckinpah's masterpiece, each man lives alone; each man dies alone.

It's not only possible but likely that Peckinpah, flush with the freedom of a large scale and large money, added to the violence trail *Bonnie and Clyde* had freshly blazed, approached *The Wild Bunch* with a very particular agenda. Suspecting it might be his last chance to hold the reins of a major commercial film, he rejected moderation and aimed to fill its two and a quarter hours with a career's worth of gory deaths and genre worship. Without a doubt, the film's purchase on greatness resides partly in the sense one gets from the violent scenes of an artist under pressure, straining before time runs down to express all he knows and all he can do, and struggling to do so within the generic bounds of an all but depleted form.

But if *The Wild Bunch* includes virtually everything Peckinpah knew or would ever know about editing, the choreographing of violence, etc. – about technique – it shows us only a very small piece of what he knew about relationships, moods, ambivalences. If his subsequent films demonstrate anything, they demonstrate this. *The Wild Bunch's* limits are not obscured but exposed by its innovations: In doing death so brilliantly the film does life somewhat less well, and serves no real justice at all to those psychological horror regions where life and death shade over and the physical cowers before the existential. This was the resource Peckinpah had to find in himself and that *The Wild Bunch*, in its purgative burst, may have made possible. He had to go past his obvious fascination with violent death as a visual phenomenon in order to see it in its contiguity with everything else – not only life but love and hate, bravado and fear.

Which is to say that if *The Wild Bunch* lacks the contemplative depth of great art, it nonetheless contains the liberating materials that in Peckinpah's case made great art possible. For the most deadly bullet ever fired in a Peckinpah film never pierced any flesh: There is a truer, deeper sense of death in the image of Pat Garrett blowing a hole through his own reflection than there is in any of *The Wild Bunch's* many contorted bodies and flying flashes of red. It seems correct, symbolically and otherwise, that Peckinpah should have had to reject the simplicities of his inher-

itance in order to breathe into his work not only the innovation he sought but the fierce refusal that it implied – and that only after burning away the underbrush of tradition could he touch the unique truths that had lain hidden inside his art from the beginning.

NOTES

- 1 Sam Peckinpah, quoted in Georgia Brown, "Once Were Westerns," *The Village Voice* (March 7, 1995): 54.
- 2 See Peckinpah, "Playboy Interview," *Playboy* (August 1972): 65; and Pauline Kael, *5001 Nights at the Movies* (New York, 1991), 837.
- 3 David Weddle, "If They Move . . . Kill 'Em!": *The Life and Times of Sam Peckinpah* (New York, 1994), 17. See also Marshall Fine, *Bloody Sam: The Life and Films of Sam Peckinpah* (New York, 1991), 11–20.
- 4 Peckinpah, *Playboy* interview, 72.
- 5 Peckinpah, quoted in Chris Hodenfield, "Sam Peckinpah Breaks a Bottle," *Rolling Stone* (May 13, 1971): 18.
- 6 For a more detailed analysis of the credit sequence, see Paul Seydor, *Peckinpah – The Western Films: A Reconsideration* (Urbana, IL, 1997), 207.
- 7 D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (London, 1977), 4.
- 8 John Wayne, "Playboy Interview," *Playboy* (May 1971): 76.
- 9 William Johnson, "Straw Dogs," *Film Quarterly* (Fall 1972): 61.
- 10 Andre Malraux, quoted in F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Whitman* (New York, 1941). xv.

REVIEWS AND COMMENTARY

NEW MOVIES – MAN AND MYTH

(*Time* magazine, June 20, 1969)

“When the legend becomes fact,” says the canny newspaper editor in John Ford’s *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, “print the legend.” Sam Peckinpah is a filmmaker dedicated to telling truths and still preserving the legend of the American West. In feature films (*Ride the High Country*, *Major Dundee*) and television shows (*The Westerner*), his characters are eminently fallible, their deeds frequently inglorious. They are legends both because and in spite of themselves. *The Wild Bunch* is Peckinpah’s most complex inquiry into the metamorphosis of man into myth. Not incidentally, it is also a raucous, violent, powerful feat of American filmmaking.

The script – which Peckinpah wrote with Walon Green – has the sound and rhythm of a rambling campfire yarn. Pike Bishop (William Holden) is the aging leader of a ragtag bunch of bandits who ride through the Southwest trying to scrape together an honorably illegal living. The money from previous jobs has just about run out, and the bunch is being trailed by a group of murderous bounty hunters. After an unsuccessful stick-up in which two of them are killed, the rest

light out for Mexico, with the bounty hunters hard on their trail, looking to make what Bishop calls "one good score."

The score turns out to be a crazy scheme to steal a U.S. armaments shipment for a free-booting Mexican general named Mapache, a slow-witted executioner fighting a losing battle against Pancho Villa's army. "We share very few sentiments with our government," Bishop explains lightly as his men prepare to take the required rifles from a U.S. Army supply train. In 1913, this sort of activity is already anachronistic and doomed to failure. Trying to fulfill the terms of the contract, the bunch get doublecrossed. At the same time, they are caught in the vise of their own simplistic code of honor ("When you side with a man, you stay with him," Bishop says). Mapache betrays them from one side while the bounty hunters attack from another, and they are all finally wiped out in the bloodiest battle ever put on film.

"Listen," Peckinpah says, "killing is no fun. I was trying to show what the hell it's like to get shot." Using a combination of fast cutting and slow motion, Peckinpah creates scenes of uncontrolled frenzy in which the feeling of chaotic violence is almost overwhelming. Where the slow motion murders in *Bonnie and Clyde* were balletic, similar scenes in *The Wild Bunch* have the agonizing effect of prolonging the moment of impact, giving each death its own individual horror. Peckinpah repeatedly suggests that the true victims of violence are the young. Children watch the scenes of brutality and carnage wide-eyed, with little fear; a Mexican mother nurses her child by holding her bandolier aside, the baby's tiny fists pressed up against the cartridges. Finally, with mounting excitement, one boy gets to participate in his first fight – and excitedly shoots Pike Bishop in the back.

Peckinpah is sometimes guilty of over-kill himself. Action sequences – like an attack by the Villa forces on Mapache – occasionally destroy the continuity of the elaborate story, and flashbacks are introduced with surprising clumsiness. These, happily, are not typical moments. More characteristic are the sweeping visual panoramas of the whole film (stunningly photographed by Lucien Ballard) and the extraordinarily forceful acting from a troupe of Hollywood professionals. Holden hasn't done such good work since *Stalag 17*, and the bunch – Ernest Borgnine, Warren Oates, Ben Johnson, Edmond O'Brien, Jaime Sanchez – all look and sound as if they had stepped out of a discarded daguerreotype. As the reluctant head of the band

of bounty hunters, Robert Ryan gives the screen performance of his career.

For all this, *The Wild Bunch* is Sam Peckinpah's triumph. His hard-edged elegies for the West come from a life spent absorbing its folkways. Born into a California pioneer family, Peckinpah is a hard liver who has found some of his script ideas by doing research in barrooms and bordellos. Because he is scrappy and unwilling to compromise, he has spent a good deal of his professional time warring with the money men in the front office who truncated *Major Dundee* and fired him from *The Cincinnati Kid* after three days of shooting. "You have to worry and fight until you get what you want," he once said, and if Peckinpah has battled more than most, his tenacity has finally paid off.

The Wild Bunch contains faults and mistakes, but its accomplishments are more than sufficient to confirm that Peckinpah, along with Stanley Kubrick and Arthur Penn, belongs with the best of the newer generation of American filmmakers.

VIOLENCE AND BEAUTY MESH IN *THE WILD BUNCH*

VINCENT CANBY

(*The New York Times*, June 25, 1969)

Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* is about the decline and fall of one outlaw gang at what must be the bleeding end of the frontier era, 1913, when Pancho Villa was tormenting a corrupt Mexican Government while the United States watched cautiously from across the border.

The movie, which opened yesterday at the Trans-Lux East and West Theaters, is very beautiful and the first truly interesting, American-made Western in years. It's also so full of violence – of an intensity that can hardly be supported by the story – that it's going to prompt a lot of people who do not know the real effect of movie violence (as I do not) to write automatic condemnations of it.

"The Wild Bunch" begins on a hot, lazy afternoon as six United States soldiers ride into a small Texas border town with all the aloofness of an army of benign occupation. Under a makeshift awning, the good bourgeoisie of San Rafael is holding a temperance meeting. Gentle spinsters, sweating discreetly, vow to abstain from all spirits.

The "soldiers" pass on to the railroad office, which they quietly proceed to rob of its cash receipts. Down the street, a group of children giggle as they watch a scorpion being eaten alive by a colony of red ants. A moment later, the town literally explodes in the ambush that has been set for the outlaws.

Borrowing a device from "Bonnie and Clyde," Peckinpah suddenly reduces the camera speed to slow motion, which at first heightens the horror of the mindless slaughter, and, then – and this is what really carries horror – makes it beautiful, almost abstract, and finally into terrible parody.

The audience, which earlier was appalled at the cynical detachment with which the camera watched the death fight of the scorpion, is now in the position of the casually cruel children. The face of a temperance parade marcher erupts in a fountain of red. Bodies, struck by bullets, make graceful arcs through the air before falling onto the dusty street, where they seem to bounce, as if on a trampoline.

This sort of choreographed brutality is repeated to excess, but in excess there is point to a film in which realism would be unbearable. "The Wild Bunch" takes the basic element[s] of the Western movie myth, which once defined a simple, morally comprehensible world, and by bending them turns them into symbols of futility and aimless corruption.

The screenplay, by Peckinpah and Walon Green, follows the members of the Wild Bunch from their disastrous, profitless experience at San Rafael to Mexico where they become involved with a smilingly sadistic Mexican general fighting Villa. Although the movie's conventional and poetic action sequences are extraordinarily good and its landscapes beautifully photographed (lots of dark foregrounds and brilliant backgrounds) by Lucien Ballard, who did "Nevada Smith," it is most interesting in its almost jolly account of chaos, corruption and defeat. All personal relationships in the movie seem somehow perverted in odd mixtures of noble sentimentality, greed and lust.

Never satisfactorily resolved is the conflict between William Holden, as the aging leader of the Wild Bunch, and Robert Ryan, as his former friend who, with disdain, leads the bounty hunters in pur-

suit of the gang. An awkward flashback shows the two men, looking like characters out of a silent movie, caught in an ambush in a bordello from which only Holden escapes.

The ideals of masculine comradeship are exaggerated and transformed into neuroses. The fraternal bonds of two brothers, members of the Wild Bunch, are so excessive [that] they prefer having their whores in tandem. A feeling of genuine compassion prompts the climactic massacre that some members of the film trade are calling, not without reason, "the blood ballet."

Peckinpah also has a way of employing Hollywood life to dramatize his legend. After years of giving bored performances in boring movies, Holden comes back gallantly in "The Wild Bunch." He looks older and tired, but he has style, both as a man and as a movie character who persists in doing what he's always done, not because he really wants the money but because there's simply nothing else to do.

Ryan, Ernest Borgnine and Edmond O'Brien add a similar kind of resonance to the film. O'Brien is a special shock, looking like an evil Gabby Hayes, a foul-mouthed, cackling old man who is the only member of the Wild Bunch to survive.

In two earlier Westerns, "Ride the High Country" (1962) and "Major Dundee" (1965), Peckinpah seemed to be creating comparatively gentle variations on the genre about the man who walks alone – a character about as rare in a Western as a panhandler on the Bowery.

In "The Wild Bunch," which is about men who walk together, but in desperation, he turns the genre inside out. It's a fascinating movie and, I think I should add, when I came out of it, I didn't feel like shooting, knifing or otherwise maiming any of Broadway's often hostile pedestrians.

WHICH VERSION DID YOU SEE?

VINCENT CANBY

(*The New York Times*, July 20, 1969)

Without making any public statement of the fact, Warner Brothers–Seven Arts, the distributor, and Phil Feldman, the producer, have eliminated four sequences from Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch*,

the Western currently at the Trans-Lux East and Trans-Lux West Theaters. The cuts, or, as Feldman likes to call them, the "lifts," which represent a little more than eight minutes in total running time, were made after the movie was reviewed. Thus, technically, "The Wild Bunch" now being shown is not the movie that critics wrote about, some most favorably, as I did. More important, the movie, as a superior work of Hollywood Western art, has been diminished, not fatally (it is still a very good and beautiful film), but certainly to an extent that will be noticeable to everyone who saw the original version and liked it, flaws and all.

I'm not inclined to become indignant about the cuts made in "The Wild Bunch," although I feel that three of the four "lifts" definitely reduce the humanity that runs through the movie in ironic counterpoint to the vividly overstated violence. "The Wild Bunch" has not been butchered the way "Isadora" seems to have been. Rather than being indignant, I'm baffled by the casual way in which moviemakers, even good moviemakers, treat their movies as well as the public. There are a lot of people who like to take movies seriously, but it's difficult when you can never be sure you're seeing a finished movie, or a version hastily assembled to meet a theater opening, or one whose content is dictated by the type of theatrical release it is to receive, or even one whose third reel was lost by the projectionist.

Last week, in checking the report that "The Wild Bunch" has been cut, I called the producer in Hollywood, where he is currently completing post-photography work on another Peckinpah film, "The Ballad of Cable Hogue." "The Wild Bunch" is the second movie that Feldman has produced – the first was "You're a Big Boy Now" – and he seems to be the kind of producer who is genuinely interested in making unusual movies. Feldman was anything but hesitant to talk about the cuts made in the film, all of which, he emphasized several times, had been made with his consent and the consent of the director (who was in Hawaii on vacation last week and could not be reached).

The lifts, said Feldman, had not been made in response to criticism that the film was too savage and brutal. Not touched are the two extraordinary battles, which open and close the movie and, in effect, frame the story of the decline and fall of an outlaw gang on the Texas–Mexican border in 1913. The cuts, he said in more or less one breath, were made to accelerate the pace of the film, to help the "es-

thetics" and perhaps (he didn't seem too sure) to shorten the running time so as to allow an extra performance in a theater's daily screening schedule. "The fact is," he went on, "we had been considering these lifts for some time, but we didn't have time to make them before the New York opening."

I can understand that problem, which faces all producers, but then Feldman went on to clinch his argument with this statement: "If we had had time to make the cuts before the New York opening, you wouldn't have seen these scenes and you wouldn't have missed them."

At the time I talked to Feldman, I hadn't yet seen the new version, but I still found this a curious avenue of persuasion. It's rather like telling me that if I were an Australian bushman, I'd regard my morning subway ride as an exotic event, so why do I beef about the cattle-car conditions? Well, I had seen the original version of the film, and I'm *not* an Australian bushman.

As if to prove that there is no final, perfect form for any movie, not, at least, for "The Wild Bunch," Feldman reported that the foreign version of the film will run approximately five minutes longer than the version that originally opened in New York. In foreign markets, he said, the movie will be a hard ticket attraction, exhibited in 70 millimeter and stereophonic sound and with an intermission in which candy can be sold. The foreign version he said, also includes a scene that is not in – nor remotely suggested by – the domestic version. This is a flashback that shows how the old leader of the Wild Bunch (William Holden) got his gimpy leg (he was shot by an irate husband).

I can't speak for other "Wild Bunch" aficionados, but now that I know it exists, I'd be interested in looking at it. But, says Feldman, like the scenes eliminated from the domestic version, it is "an interruption of the *flow* of the story."

Now, having seen the re-edited version at the Tran-Lux West, I'd be inclined to agree that one of the four lifts does ease the flow of the story. This is the longest individual cut, about three and one-half minutes, and shows the Mexican Federal forces of the bandit general Mapache (Emilio Fernandez) under attack by the forces of Pancho Villa. Judged simply in terms of the story of the members of the Wild Bunch, the scene is not important, but, like all of the action sequences, it is beautifully staged and enriches the movie's texture – the feeling for time and place.

Each of the three other cuts, I feel, does affect the story itself by eliminating either motivation or dramatization of the outlaw gang's contradictory code of honor. Now gone from the movie is the flashback that shows Holden and Robert Ryan, in their youth, caught in an ambush in a whore house from which only Holden escapes. It was an awkward scene, but it was the only scene in the film that showed the two men together and provided some explanation as to why the two former friends are involved in the death struggle that is the surface story of the film.

Another cut eliminates the strange confession of the oldest member of the Wild Bunch (Edmond O'Brien) that the youngest member, who has just been killed, is actually his grandson, a fact, he says somewhat hesitantly, he didn't mention before because he didn't want any special favors for the boy. The fourth cut is within the dreamy interlude the Wild Bunch spends in a small Mexican village. The gang arrives at the village and in the new version almost immediately departs, as the villagers line the road, waving and singing like Tahitians saying farewell to the crew of the *Bounty*.

In talking about the cuts, Feldman stressed something that is quite true, that the making of every movie is a joint effort and thus, in effect, not comparable to the creation of a novel.

"Peckinpah and I," he said, "worked from the first to the final frame together. We didn't necessarily always agree, but we agreed between 95 and 96 percent of the time. Some people have accused Sam of wanting to make it more bloody. Actually, he toned down the violence that I wanted, especially in the first fight.

"The first version of the picture that we assembled ran three hours and 10 minutes. I'm sorry that a lot of that footage had to be eliminated, but it was just too long. Every time we made a cut, Lucien Ballard [the cinematographer] chastised me for removing some of his pretty pictures. For Lucien, every cut was a stake driven through Dracula's heart. If 'The Wild Bunch' were to please everyone who worked on it, it would have to be three and one-half hours long."

I'm not sure that there is an absolutely perfect version of "The Wild Bunch" somewhere on a cutting room floor. I do feel, however, that the movie on exhibition here now is just a little less interesting than the one I reviewed. It's still an important work of movie literature, but some chapters have been torn out.

Seeing "The Wild Bunch" at the Trans-Lux West last Saturday re-

minded me once again that there sometimes is a great difference between the way a movie looks in a private screening room and in a theater. The movie, shot in wide-screen Panavision, looked beautiful in the screening room, where the image completely filled the properly wide screen. At the Trans-Lux West, the image, because it is so wide, can only utilize about three-fourths of the screen height. At the theater you have the feeling that you're peering at the movie through a slightly opened window. I also first saw "True Grit" in a private screening room, a small room where the projector was probably no more than 40 feet from the screen. The colors were rich and deep. When I went back to see the film at the Radio City Music Hall, the color brilliance seemed definitely off, perhaps because of the tremendous distance between the projector and the screen.

**PRESS VIOLENT ABOUT FILM'S VIOLENCE,
PROD SAM PECKINPAH FOLLOWING
"BUNCH"**

(Variety, July 2, 1969)

— Freeport, Bahamas, June 24. No doubt but that the most disputatious film shown at W7's massive press junket here on Grand Bahama Island, which ended Sunday (22), was Sam Peckinpah's "The Wild Bunch." On the morning after its showing a near-raucous press conference with pic's creators and key actors took place at the King's Inn and Golf Club during which the film's castigators and defenders squared off against each other. Violence was the issue, since the western may be the most violent U.S. film ever made.

The interesting aspect was how the confab changed character as it progressed, beginning as little more than an attack on the film and ending with "The Wild Bunch" defended hotly by its admirers. With Peckinpah absent for the beginning of the session, highlights went something like this:

Virginia Kelly (*Reader's Digest*): "I have only one question to ask: *Why was this film made?*"

Phil Feldman (producer): "The era of escapism is over; the era of

reality is here. We in America have to face our problems and resolve them. The American people has been a violent people, from its beginnings; we tend to look away from our violence, as we look away from hunger in America. But these things must be looked at squarely."

Voice: "But do the ends justify the means? Haven't you considered the effect on audiences of such realistic portrayal of violence in films?"

Feldman: "Truth is not beautiful; dying is not beautiful. The entertainment industry has a right and duty to depict reality as it is. If audiences react against the reality that is shown, it may prove therapeutic."

Voice: "I'd like to ask William Holden why he starred in such a film as this. He lives in Kenya and has taken great interest in African game preservation. Films like this encourage violence against every living thing – animals as well as humans."

William Holden (actor): "I just can't get over the reaction here. Are people surprised that violence really exists in the world? Just turn on your tv set any night. The viewer sees the Vietnam War, cities burning, campus riots; he sees plenty of violence. Against this background, the pendulum in motion pictures has swung in one direction. Let us hope that it swings back on matters of sexual morality and violence."

After about a half hour of this, Peckinpah enters.

Stuart Byron (*Variety*): "Perhaps we should just recap what's already been asked of the others. Why did you make this film? What does it say? Why all the violence?"

Sam Peckinpah (writer-director): "I have nothing to say. The film speaks for itself."

Red Reed (*Holiday*): "Then why are we holding this press conference?"

Peckinpah: "That's a good question."

Voice: "I think we deserve an answer to the simple question as to whether Mr. Peckinpah enjoys violence."

Peckinpah: "All right – my idea was that it would have a cathartic effect. No, I don't like violence. In fact when I look at the film myself I find it unbearable. I don't think I'll be able to see it again for five years."

Feldman: "You shouldn't think that this subject is all we're interested in. The next film Sam and I made was a comedy."

Reed: "I can't wait to miss it."

Byron: "What cuts were made in order to get the Motion Picture Association of America to change the film's rating from X to R?"

Feldman: "The original cut ran three hours: we took out 40 minutes. At the request of the MPAA, one line of dialogue was removed, and a few other bits of action. But most of the cutting was our own."

Roger Ebert (*Chicago Sun-Times*): "I suppose all of you up there are getting the impression that this film has no defenders. That's not true. A lot of us think that 'The Wild Bunch' is a great film. It's hard to ask questions about a film you like, easy about one you hate. So I just wanted it said that to a lot of people this movie is a masterpiece."

Voice: "Hear! Hear!"

Peckinpah: "I tried to emphasize the sense of horror and agony that violence provides. Violence is not a game."

Richard Lederer (W7 adpub veep): "I think I should say at this point that we make it very clear in our advertising that this is a violent film. In our teaser ads. You may think that's being a bit tricky, but there's an honesty behind it. We don't want the wrong people seeing the film."

Ernest Borgnine (actor): "I must say that when I received the script I didn't read into it all of these controversial things. We who made the film knew it was violent and even felt repulsed at times, but we felt that we were achieving something. So many significant things are now being read into it that perhaps there is a moral suggestion here."

Ebert: "One thing I'm curious about. There's a scene of a whole bridge collapsing with people still on it, and those look like real people on horses falling into the water to me."

Peckinpah: "Yes, they are. I had a great stunt director on the film."

Sam Lesner (*Chicago Daily News*): "But what about the way the blood spurts practically across a room? Medically, I'm told that only happens when certain arteries are hit by a bullet. Yet in your film it happens all the time. Did you have a doctor advising you?"

Peckinpah: "Yes – the stuntman was a great doctor. No. I'm kidding. Yes, we had a doctor."

Voice: "You juxtapose children with people being killed, and that seems to suggest that the children are dying also. Yet you never show a child being killed. Why?"

Peckinpah: "Because I'm constitutionally unable to show a child in jeopardy."

Voice: "If you want to make a statement against violence and war, why make a western? Why not make a film about Vietnam?"

Peckinpah: "The Western is a universal frame within which it is possible to comment on today."

Mary Knoblauch (*Chicago Today*): "You know, it's all very easy for all of you to sit there and say you're making a film against violence. But the fact is that the people who don't know what violence really is won't go to this picture. They'll be kept away by the ads, and meanwhile they'll aimlessly re-elect the politicians who continue the Vietnam war. It's your intention to reach these people, but they won't come. This film will open the Roosevelt Theatre and get the action crowd – the ones who really like violence."

FILMOGRAPHY

The Deadly Companions (1961)

DIRECTION: Sam Peckinpah

SCREENPLAY: A. S. Fleischman, based on his novel

CINEMATOGRAPHY: William H. Clothier

EDITING: Stanley E. Rabjohn

MUSIC: Marlin Skiles; song "A Dream of Love" by Marlin Skiles and Charles FitzSimons, sung by Maureen O'Hara

SOUND: Gordon Sawyer and Robert J. Callen

PRODUCER: Charles FitzSimons

RELEASED BY: Pathe-American

RUNNING TIME: 90 minutes

PRINCIPAL CAST: Maureen O'Hara (Kit Tilden), Brian Keith (Yellowleg), Steve Cochran (Billy), Chill Wills (Turkey), Strother Martin (Parson)

Ride the High Country (1962)

DIRECTION: Sam Peckinpah

SCREENPLAY: N. B. Stone, Jr.

CINEMATOGRAPHY: Lucien Ballard

EDITING: Frank Santillo

MUSIC: George Bassman

PRODUCER: Richard E. Lyons

RELEASED BY: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer

RUNNING TIME: 94 minutes

PRINCIPAL CAST: Randolph Scott (Gil Westrum), Joel McCrea (Steve Judd), Mariette Hartley (Elsa Knudsen), Ron Starr (Heck Longtree), Edgar Buchanan (Judge Tolliver), R. G. Armstrong (Joshua Knudsen), James Drury (Billy Hammond), L. Q. Jones (Sylvus Hammond), John Anderson (Elder Hammond), John Davis Chandler (Jimmy Hammond), Warren Oates (Henry Hammond)

Major Dundee (1965)

DIRECTION: Sam Peckinpah

SCREENPLAY: Harry Julian Fink, Oscar Saul, Sam Peckinpah

STORY: Harry Julian Fink

CINEMATOGRAPHY: Sam Leavitt

EDITING: William A. Lyon, Don Starling, Howard Kunin

MUSIC: Daniele Amfitheatrof; title song ("Major Dundee March") by Daniele Amfitheatrof and Ned Washington

SOUND: James Z. Flaster

PRODUCER: Jerry Bresler

RELEASED BY: Columbia Pictures

RUNNING TIME: 134 minutes

PRINCIPAL CAST: Charlton Heston (Major Amos Dundee), Richard Harris (Capt. Benjamin Tyreen), Jim Hutton (Lieutenant Graham), James Coburn (Samuel Potts), Michael Anderson, Jr. (Tim Ryan), Senta Berger (Teresa Santiago), Mario Adorf (Sergeant Gomez), Brock Peters (Aesop), Warren Oates (O. W. Hadley), Ben Johnson (Sergeant Chillum), R. G. Armstrong (Reverend Dahlstrom), L. Q. Jones (Arthur Hadley), Slim Pickens (Wiley), Karl Swenson (Captain Waller), Michael Pate (Sierra Charriba)

The Wild Bunch (1969)

DIRECTION: Sam Peckinpah

SCREENPLAY: Walon Green, Sam Peckinpah

STORY: Walon Green, Roy N. Sickner

CINEMATOGRAPHY: Lucien Ballard

EDITING: Louis Lombardo

ASSOCIATE EDITOR: Robert L. Wolfe

MUSIC: Jerry Fielding

MUSIC SUPERVISION: Sonny Burke

SOUND: Robert J. Miller

ART DIRECTION: Edward Carrere

SPECIAL EFFECTS: Bud Hulburd

WARDROBE: Gordon Dawson
SECOND UNIT DIRECTION: Buzz Henry
ASSISTANT DIRECTORS: Cliff Coleman, Fred Gammon
PRODUCTION MANAGER: William Faralla
ASSOCIATE PRODUCER: Roy N. Sickner
PRODUCER: Phil Feldman
RELEASED BY: Warner Brothers/Seven Arts
RUNNING TIME: 145 minutes (original European release and 1995 restoration), 143 minutes (initial domestic release), 139 minutes (cut domestic release)
PRINCIPAL CAST: William Holden (Pike Bishop), Ernest Borgnine (Dutch Engstrom), Robert Ryan (Deke Thornton), Edmond O'Brien (Freddie Sykes), Warren Oates (Lyle Gorch), Jaime Sanchez (Angel), Ben Johnson (Tector Gorch), Emilio Fernandez (Mapache), Strother Martin (Coffer), L. Q. Jones (T.C.), Albert Dekker (Harrigan), Bo Hopkins (Crazy Lee), Bud Taylor (Wainscoat), Jorge Russek (Zamorra), Alfonso Arau (Herrera), Chano Urueta (Don José), Sonia Amelio (Teresa), Aurora Clavel (Aurora), Yolande Ponce (Yolo), Fernando Wagner (Mohr),

The Ballad of Cable Hogue (1970)

DIRECTION: Sam Peckinpah
SCREENPLAY: John Crawford, Edmund Penney
CINEMATOGRAPHY: Lucien Ballard
EDITING: Frank Santillo, Lou Lombardo
MUSIC: Jerry Goldsmith
SONGS: "Tomorrow Is the Song I Sing" by Jerry Goldsmith, Richard Gillis, sung by Richard Gillis; "Wait for Me, Sunrise" by Richard Gillis, sung by Richard Gillis; "Butterfly Mornings" by Richard Gillis, sung by Stella Stevens and Jason Robards
SOUND: Don Rush
EXECUTIVE PRODUCER: Phil Feldman
PRODUCER: Sam Peckinpah
ASSOCIATE PRODUCER: Gordon Dawson
CO-PRODUCER: William Faralla
RELEASED BY: Warner Brothers
RUNNING TIME: 121 minutes
PRINCIPAL CAST: Jason Robards (Cable Hogue), Stella Stevens (Hildy), David Warner (Joshua), Strother Martin (Bowen), Slim Pickens (Ben), L. Q. Jones (Taggart), Peter Whitney (Cushing), R. G. Armstrong (Quittner), Gene Evans (Clete), Susan O'Connell (Claudia)

Straw Dogs (1971)

DIRECTION: Sam Peckinpah

SCREENPLAY: David Zelag Goodman, Sam Peckinpah, based on the novel *The Siege of Trencher's Farm*, by Gordon M. Williams

CINEMATOGRAPHY: John Coquillon

EDITING: Roger Spottiswoode, Paul Davies, Tony Lawson

EDITORIAL CONSULTANT: Robert Wolfe

MUSIC: Jerry Fielding

SOUND: John Bramall

PRODUCER: Daniel Melnick

RELEASED BY: ABC Pictures

RUNNING TIME: 118 minutes (113 minutes U.S. release)

PRINCIPAL CAST: Dustin Hoffman (David Sumner), Susan George (Amy Sumner), David Warner (Henry Niles), Peter Vaughan (Tom Hedden), T. P. McKenna (Major Scott), Del Henney (Charlie Venner), Ken Hutchison (Norman Scutt), Colin Welland (Reverend Hood), Jim Norton (Chris Cawsey), Sally Thomsett (Janice), Donald Webster (Phil Riddaway), Peter Arne (John Niles), Cherina Mann (Mrs. Hood)

Junior Bonner (1972)

DIRECTION: Sam Peckinpah

SCREENPLAY: Jeb Rosebrook

CINEMATOGRAPHY: Lucien Ballard

EDITING: Robert Wolfe, Frank Santillo

MUSIC: Jerry Fielding

SONGS: "Arizona Morning," "Rodeo Man" written and sung by Rod Hart; "Bound to Be Back Again" by Dennis Lambert and Brian Potter, sung by Alex Taylor

PRODUCER: Joe Wizan

RELEASED BY: ABC Pictures

RUNNING TIME: 103 minutes

PRINCIPAL CAST: Steve McQueen (Junior Bonner), Robert Preston (Ace Bonner), Ida Lupino (Elle Bonner), Joe Don Baker (Curly Bonner), Barbara Leigh (Charmagne), Mary Murphy (Ruth Bonner), Ben Johnson (Buck Roan), Bill McKinney (Red Terwiliger), Sandra Deel (Nurse Arlis)

The Getaway (1972)

DIRECTION: Sam Peckinpah

SCREENPLAY: Walter Hill, based on the novel by Jim Thompson

CINEMATOGRAPHY: Lucien Ballard

EDITING: Robert Wolfe

EDITORIAL CONSULTANT: Roger Spottiswoode

MUSIC: Quincy Jones

SOUND: Charles M. Wilborn

PRODUCERS: David Foster, Mitchell Brower

RELEASED BY: First Artists

RUNNING TIME: 122 minutes

PRINCIPAL CAST: Steve McQueen (Doc McCoy), Ali MacGraw (Carol McCoy), Ben Johnson (Jack Benyon), Sally Struthers (Fran Clinton), Al Lettieri (Rudy Butler), Slim Pickens (Cowboy), Jack Dodson (Harold Clinton), Dub Taylor (Laughlin), Bo Hopkins (Frank Jackson)

Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid (1973)

DIRECTION: Sam Peckinpah

SCREENPLAY: Rudolph Wurlitzer

CINEMATOGRAPHY: John Coquillon

EDITING: Roger Spottiswoode, Garth Craven, Robert L. Wolfe, Richard Halsey, David Berlatsky, Tony De Zarraga

MUSIC: Bob Dylan

SOUND: Charles M. Wilborn, Harry W. Tetrick

PRODUCER: Gordon Carroll

RELEASED BY: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer

RUNNING TIME: 122 minutes (rough "director's cut"), 106 minutes (original release)

PRINCIPAL CAST: James Coburn (Pat Garrett), Kris Kristofferson (Billy the Kid), Bob Dylan (Alias), Jason Robards (Governor Lew Wallace), Barry Sullivan (Chisum), Richard Jaeckel (Sheriff Kip McKinney), Katy Jurado (Mrs. Baker), Slim Pickens (Sheriff Baker), Chill Wills (Lemuel), John Beck (Poe), R. G. Armstrong (Deputy Ollinger), Luke Askew (Eno), Richard Bright (Holly), Matt Clark (J. W. Bell), Jack Elam (Alamosa Bill), Emilio Fernandez (Paco), Paul Fix (Pete Maxwell), L. Q. Jones (Black Harris), Charlie Martin Smith (Bowdre), Harry Dean Stanton (Luke), Claudia Bryar (Mrs. Horrell), Aurora Clavel (Ida Garrett), Rutanya Alda (Ruthie Lee), Walter Kelley (Rupert), Gene Evans (Mr. Horrell), Sam Peckinpah (Will)

Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia (1974)

DIRECTION: Sam Peckinpah

SCREENPLAY: Gordon Dawson, Sam Peckinpah, from a story by Frank Kowalski and Sam Peckinpah

CINEMATOGRAPHY: Alex Phillips, Jr.

SUPERVISING EDITOR: Garth Craven

EDITORS: Robbe Roberts, Sergio Ortega, Dennis E. Dolan

MUSIC: Jerry Fielding

SOUND: Manuel Topete

EXECUTIVE PRODUCER: Helmut Dantine

PRODUCER: Martin Baum

ASSOCIATE PRODUCER: Gordon Dawson

RELEASED BY: United Artists

RUNNING TIME: 112 minutes

PRINCIPAL CAST: Warren Oates (Bennie), Isela Vega (Elita), Gig Young (Quill), Robert Webber (Sappensly), Helmut Dantine (Max), Emilio Fernandez (El Jefe), Chano Urueta (bartender), Jorge Russek (Cueto), Chalo Gonzalez (Chalo), Janine Maldonado (Theresa), Tamara Garina (Grandmother Moreno), Kris Kristofferson, Donny Fritts

The Killer Elite (1975)

DIRECTION: Sam Peckinpah

SCREENPLAY: Marc Norman, Sterling Silliphant, from the novel by Robert Rostand

CINEMATOGRAPHY: Phil Lathrop

EDITING: Garth Craven, Tony De Zarraga, Monte Hellman

MUSIC: Jerry Fielding

SOUND: Richard Portman, Charles M. Wilborn

PRODUCERS: Martin Baum, Arthur Lewis

EXECUTIVE PRODUCER: Helmut Dantine

RELEASED BY: United Artists

RUNNING TIME: 122 minutes

PRINCIPAL CAST: James Caan (Mike Locken), Robert Duvall (George Hansen), Arthur Hill (Cap Collis), Bo Hopkins (Jerome Miller), Mako (Chung), Burt Young (Mac), Gig Young (Weyburn), Helmut Dantine (Vorodny)

Cross of Iron (1977)

DIRECTION: Sam Peckinpah

SCREENPLAY: Julius J. Epstein, Herbert Asmodi, from a novel by Willi Heinrich

CINEMATOGRAPHY: John Coquillon

EDITING: Tony Lawson, Mike Ellis

MUSIC: Ernest Gold

SOUND: David Hildyard

PRODUCER: Wolf Hartwig

RELEASED BY: E.M.I.

RUNNING TIME: 133 minutes

PRINCIPAL CAST: James Coburn (Sergeant Steiner), Maximilian Schell (Captain Stransky), James Mason (Colonel Brandt), David Warner (Captain Kiesel), Klaus Lowitsch (Kruger), Roger Fritz (Lieutenant Triebig), Fred Stillkraut (Schnurrbart), Michael Nowka (Dietz), Senta Berger (Eva), Veronique Vendell (Marga), Mikael Slavco Stimac (Russian boy soldier)

Convoy (1978)

DIRECTION: Sam Peckinpah

SCREENPLAY: B. W. L. Norton, based on the song by C. W. McCall

CINEMATOGRAPHY: Harry Stradling, Jr.

SUPERVISING EDITOR: Graeme Clifford

EDITORS: John Wright, Garth Craven

MUSIC: Chip Davis

SOUND: Bill Randall

SECOND UNIT DIRECTION: Walter Kelley, James Coburn

EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS: Michael Deeley, Barry Spikings

PRODUCER: Robert E. Sherman

RELEASED BY: United Artists/E.M.I.

RUNNING TIME: 110 minutes

PRINCIPAL CAST: Kris Kristofferson (Martin Penwald, a.k.a. Rubber Duck), Ali MacGraw (Melissa), Ernest Borgnine (Dirty Lyle Wallace), Burt Young (Bobby, a.k.a. Pig Pen), Madge Sinclair (Widow Woman), Franklyn Ajaye (Spider Mike), Brian Davies (Chuck Arnold), Seymour Cassel (Governor Gerry Haskins), Cassie Yates (Violet), Walter Kelley (Federal Agent Hamilton), John Bryson (Texas governor), Sam Peckinpah (news crewman)

The Osterman Weekend (1983)

DIRECTION: Sam Peckinpah

SCREENPLAY: Alan Sharp, based on the novel by Robert Ludlum

SCREENPLAY ADAPTATION: Ian Masters

CINEMATOGRAPHY: John Coquillon

EDITING: Edward Abroms, David Rawlins

MUSIC: Lalo Schifrin

SOUND: Jim Troutman

PRODUCERS: Peter S. David, William N. Panzer

RELEASED BY: Twentieth Century-Fox

RUNNING TIME: 105 minutes

PRINCIPAL CAST: Rutger Hauer (John Tanner), John Hurt (Lawrence Fassett), Meg Foster (Ali Tanner), Dennis Hopper (Richard Tremayne), Craig T. Nelson (Bernard Osterman), Helen Shaver (Virginia Tremayne), Cassie Yates (Betty Cardone), Burt Lancaster (Maxwell Danforth), Chris Sarandon (Joseph Cardone)

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